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Stalkers No Strangers

Most Victims have at Least Dated the Man

By Abigail Goldman, Las Vegas Sun

Juan Manzur was a doctor, so after he stabbed his wife six times, he sutured the wounds himself, without anesthesia. After Manzur kicked her shins with steel-toed boots, he brought home plaster for her cast. And when the good doctor wasn't home with his wife, he was watching her still. Hidden cameras rolled inside the Manzur household.

Manzur, like many perpetrators of domestic violence, was a stalker. A family man who raged to know his wife's every movement, the doctor is among the most grimly memorable stalkers Metro Lt. Brad Simpson has ever encountered.

"This man was so obsessed about what his wife was doing every moment of the day that he had video cameras in every room of the house," Simpson recalls. "And he was just very bizarre, and very, very controlling."

While the tabloids would have us believe that stalkers are all distant obsessives, or crazed fans who pop up desperate and delusional on celebrity doorsteps, the truth is that most stalkers seldom look beyond their closest companion.

More than half of the time, studies show, stalkers and their victims have dated, been married or are still together. The most dangerous stalkers – that is, the most statistically lethal – once had sexual relationships with their victims. Academics call it "intimate-partner stalking" – one person, generally a jilted or abusive partner, who seeks out any variety of recurring and unwanted contact with the object of his obsession.

Most intimate-partner stalkers physically pursue their victims. Some approach victims; others wait outside their work or stop by their homes to steal something. Still others send threatening letters or issue death threats over the phone. Sometimes, they harass the victim's friends and family. Sometimes they kill their pets. (Manzur's children told police their father stomped the family Pomeranian to death.)

Detectives working in Metro's Crimes Against Youth and Family bureau investigated about 454 stalking cases last year, the vast majority involving intimate-partner stalkers. The better you know someone, after all, the easier they are to hunt.

"They know where they work, they know their habits. They know who their friends are. They know where they play," Simpson says. "Most of these people are serial stalkers. They will go from one relationship – if they can control it, they'll stay there. If they can't, they'll stalk for a while and they'll move on, usually for another victim."

The number of stalking cases is deceptively low – the annual tally counts only investigations where stalking was the perpetrator's lone charge, or their worst offense, Metro Sgt. Chuck Pierce says. In reality, stalking is often at the dark heart of crimes that seemed to be about anything but. And so, they are counted as burglary, trespassing, tampering with private property, loitering, harassment or homicide.

"You're talking about issues of power and control," Simpson says. "It has to do with wanting to maintain the relationship and the belief that if I can't have you, nobody can."

About 20 percent of the homicides Metro investigates involve intimate partners – about 30 last year. These deaths usually start with stalking, Simpson says.

His is not an anecdotal observation. About 76 percent of female murder victims were first stalked by their intimate partner, according to a 1999 study on "femicide," the scholarly term for slaying women. More than half had reported the stalking to police before they were killed.

"The most dangerous time for any woman in a relationship is when it's ending," Simpson says. "Within the first six months after it ends. That's when it gets nasty."

Manzur was arrested in 2003 and pleaded guilty the following year to several counts of battery, assault, coercion and kidnapping, among others.

He wasn't, however, charged with stalking – by the time the doctor was close to killing his wife with abuse, video-surveillance stalking was but a little part of the bloody picture. Manzur will spend years in jail – he was sentenced to a 9-to-33-year term – but he's an exception.

Most intimate-partner stalkers are impossible to arrest, even if they're guilty, because victims must gather the evidence.

"It's probably one of the most frustrating crimes to work with because it's one of the only crimes that victims are asked to prove on their own," says Elynne Greene, a Metro victims advocate. "Sometimes they don't get the information we need and so after eight months of being tortured, we have to say, 'Hmmm, sorry. We don't have enough evidence.'"

The problem for police is that intimate-partner stalking is an every-waking-minute crime, and detectives can't be there for most of it.

Nevada law defines stalking as two or more unwanted contacts, although the district attorney's office would like at least three documented incidents, Simpson says.

So victims are asked to keep "stalking logs," to document and save any letters or e-mails they receive, to purchase call-tracing devices to record telephone contact and to keep a camera handy should they muster the courage to photograph their tormentor in the act.

Get a protection order, and perhaps the stalker will violate it with witnesses around. Yet the court order is only paper. It's as useless as the next garbage can and, Simpson notes "won't stop a bullet."

"Unfortunately," he says, "we put a lot of weight on getting our victims to do our investigations for us."

Meanwhile, the evidence is seldom hard enough to survive a courtroom scrubbing. One person's stalking log is another person's list of chance encounters. Harassing calls from a pay phone can be anyone. So can stolen mail, slashed tires or a utility that's suddenly cut off.

"Eventually you lose perspective of reality," Greene says. "You see some paper on the doorway and you wonder, did the wind blow it there? Or is someone watching you? You start questioning your own sort of reality. I deal with victims where their whole life is taken over."

Greene worked with one woman whose husband, behind bars for stalking her, hired hit men to kill her. Another woman was followed across five states – it didn't matter that she had changed her identity and gone underground. Her stalker gave Greene a short answer for the great lengths he went to chase his ex-wife: "If she hadn't moved around so much, I wouldn't have had to follow her."

Technology further complicates things. Stalkers with access to their victims' computers – and that's often the case among intimates – can install software that monitors every site their subjects visit and every key they punch. That means open season on passwords, bank accounts and bills.

Other stalkers subscribe to Web sites that sell a wealth of personal information for about \$50 – a price many predators are only too happy to pay, Simpson says.

"There have been cases when the stalker just knows too much," he says. "They will spend a vast amount of time researching where they're at, what they're doing. They become obsessed with the predation."

At Safe Nest, a local agency that provides shelter for victims of domestic violence, one woman discovered her stalker had installed a Global Positioning System tracking device in her car. Another learned her stalker had secretly paid to have a similar tracking service put in her cell phone.

And don't forget the old-fashioned forms of psychological terrorism, Safe Nest Associate Director Kathleen Brooks says. Some stalkers phone the shelter; others show up outside. The stalkers aren't trying to get in so much as to get under their victims' skin.

Some women lose hope and let stalkers back into their lives, Brooks says. Somehow, it seems simpler than looking over your shoulder for a lifetime.

Most victims hesitate to get law enforcement involved, Greene says. They're too nice or too scared to confront their stalker at the outset, or they're embarrassed they didn't know better, or they're worried that cops could make it worse.

And they can. Police contact can increase a stalker's interest in the victim, or escalate the threat.

"Psychologically, you feel like you're being held hostage," Greene says. "Sometimes they're a pain in the neck and they're never going to hurt you. Other times, if they can get their hands on you, they'll kill you. But you don't know that."

Greene was stalked in college, by a man she never saw but who called her, nonetheless, to compliment the red sweater she was wearing or inquire why she was home on a Friday night.

One in 12 women will be stalked in their lifetime, according to research cited by the National Center for Victims of Crime. In 2003, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention put a price tag on intimate-partner stalking: A study found about 43 percent of victims seek health consultations as a result of the crime and pay, on average, \$690 in bills for every stalking incident. The victims also report time lost from jobs and household chores – an estimated 2.9 million days annually. They miss work, most likely because they're afraid to go outside.

"It's a private violence," Simpson says. He urges victims to file reports and save everything – even love letters can become evidence.

On Tuesday afternoon, a stalking victim lets her phone ring long. She wasn't sure who was on the line, she explains to a reporter. And she'll talk, but only if her name isn't used.

"I'm a nervous wreck," the 51-year-old woman says in staccato. "Even if the phone rings, I jump. I can't seem to calm down. I'm just real shaky. I'm scared he's going to do something to me. I feel like somebody is going to jump me."

Last March, she neglected to return a call from her boyfriend of four months. Furious, he spent an entire weekend calling her, hundreds of times, leaving death-threat messages. The following weekend, he did the same.

Police, armed with the answering-machine evidence, charged him with aggravated stalking. In court, before the judge, he called her a bitch. Now he's out on bail.

"I know what happened," she says.

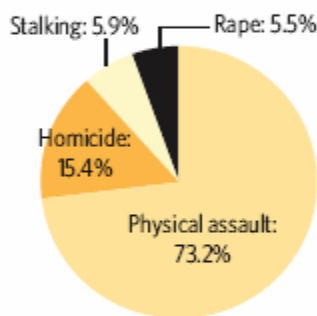
“I’m too friendly with strangers. He was real charming. We had everything in common.”

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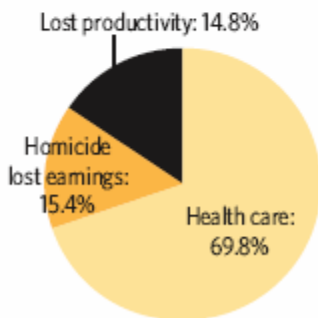
Intimate-partner violence costs*

The largest proportion of the costs is derived from physical assault victimizations because that type of intimate-partner violence is the most prevalent. The largest component of that violence’s cost is health care, accounting for nearly \$4.1 billion — more than two-thirds of the total costs.

Percentage of costs of intimate-partner violence against U.S. adult women by victimization type



Percentage of costs of intimate-partner violence against U.S. adult women by cost type



*The data presented reflect costs associated with intimate-partner violence victimizations that occurred in 1995; data are the most appropriate and reliable currently available.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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