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[Stalking] Victims Tend to Experience Emotional, Personal Problems

By Michael Graczyk, Associated Press

HUNTSVILLE, TEXAS — Nearly one in five Texans questioned by researchers in a Sam Houston State University study identified themselves as victims of stalkers over a recent two-year period.

The study by the Crime Victims Institute at the Huntsville school's Criminal Justice Center, believed to be the first on stalking in the state, reported that three-quarters of those victims experienced emotional or other personal problems.

The most common reaction was anger, followed by sleeplessness. Other effects included loss of concentration, fear of being alone and feelings of helplessness.

"Stalking can affect every part of a person's life," Glen Kercher, the institute's director, said of the Stalking in Texas survey, based on questioning of 701 randomly selected Texas residents last spring. "The psychological effects of stalking can also be daunting. Understandably, many victims were more easily frightened and paranoid, less outgoing and assertive."

The 18 percent who reported being stalked reported an overall 453 stalking incidents over the 24 months covered by the survey. The most frequent instance was repeated telephone calls, reported by 35 percent of victims, followed by 34 percent of victims who said their stalker stole items from their house, car or workplace.

Others reported getting threatening phone calls, being spied on at home, having their vehicle tampered with, having unwanted contact with their stalker who waited for them outside their home or work and getting their house, car or business broken into by their stalker.

Kercher, assisted in the study by doctoral student Matthew Johnson, said he was surprised that the survey showed men and women were about equally likely to be stalked.

Of all those surveyed, 16 percent of men and 20 percent of women reported being stalked.

Nearly half, 47 percent, of male victims said their stalker was a man. Among women, 59 percent said they were stalked by a man.

Stalking victims are most likely to be younger than 35 and never married, although separated or divorced people were the next most likely victims.

Each of the victims reported an average of more than three stalking incidents, and 57 percent said they were acquainted with their stalker.

Also, the survey found stalking often was preceded by violence between the victim and offender, suggesting that stalkers “are often motivated by possessiveness and control issues,” the survey report said.

Of the 75 percent of victims who had some idea why they were targeted, the most common reason was jealousy on the part of the stalker.

Only 43 percent of the victims reported their experience to police, and just 20 percent of those said their stalker had been arrested.

“The low arrest rate is a function of this being a very difficult crime to investigate,” Kercher said. “And often, if a person is reporting to police that they’ve got a threatening phone call, police are not adequately trained. That’s why, in our conclusions, we recommend more training for police, for prosecutors.”

In Texas, stalking is a Class A misdemeanor, carrying a fine of up to \$4,000 and a year in jail. If the stalker has a prior stalking conviction, it becomes a third-degree felony with a penalty of two to 10 years in prison and a fine up to \$10,000.

Of those who said they had been stalked, 60 percent were between the ages of 18 and 34, suggesting that as age increases, the likelihood of being a stalking victim decreases.

Hispanics were significantly more likely to be victims than whites or blacks.

Students and part-time employees were more likely to be victims than full-time workers, along with people making less than \$30,000 a year.

Laws against stalking are relatively new.

The term entered the public consciousness in December 1980, when Mark David Chapman killed former Beatle John Lennon in New York. A decade later, California became the first state to pass anti-stalking legislation in the wake of the 1989 slaying of a young actress, Rebecca Schaeffer, by a fan who had stalked her for two years.

Now, all 50 states and the federal government have such laws. Texas passed its first in 1995, and the Legislature repeatedly has broadened or refined the law since then.

Kercher said he attends conferences across the country dealing with victim issues.

“You see stalking come up over and over again,” he said. “We did a review of literature and found out there’s so little out there. We wanted to make a contribution.”

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