Violence and the prior victim–stalker relationship

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Previous research has suggested that stalkers who are ex-partners are more likely to be violent towards their victims than acquaintance or stranger stalkers. A survey was conducted in Britain of 95 individuals who had contacted the Suzy Lamplugh Trust because they were being stalked.

Method Eighty-seven of the victims were female and seven were male. They were put into three categories: ex-intimates, former acquaintances and strangers.

Results Ex-intimates were the most aggressive of the three groups. Ex-partners were overall the most intrusive in their behaviour and were also the most likely to threaten and assault third parties as well as their principal victim. Stranger stalkers, however, were significantly more likely than ex-partners to be convicted of stalking-related offences.

Conclusion The experiences of our sample would suggest that being stalked carries a high violence risk. Across relational subtypes, over 40% of respondents had experienced physical assault, including attempted murder, sexual assault, or a combination of these acts.

Introduction

A major issue in stalking research is whether the perpetrators of this crime can be characterized as harmless but misguided individuals or whether stalking is a prelude to violence against the victim. One method of researching this question is by attempting to identify subgroups of stalkers who may be more violence prone than others. Ex-partners have been singled out as one such group, with some evidence suggesting that they present a higher violence risk to their victims than do acquaintance or stranger stalkers. The present paper reviews those studies relevant to this argument, and provides further analyses of the relationship between stalker violence and the prior degree of intimacy between victim and stalker. The current sample consists of 95 self-defined
stalking victims based in the United Kingdom. England and Wales acknowledged stalking as a significant social problem relatively recently, legislating against it in 1997 (Protection from Harassment Act, 1997), whereas the USA and Australia first outlawed stalking in 1990 and 1993 respectively. As a consequence, there are comparatively few studies of stalking that derive from the UK.

The 1998 British Crime Survey was the first to examine experiences of stalking in England and Wales. It estimated that 2.9% of adults had been the victim of ‘persistent and unwanted attention’ during the preceding year, with a lifetime risk of 11.8%. Around one-third of stalkers were ex-partners of the victim, one-third former acquaintances and one-third were strangers (Budd and Mattinson, 2000). Thirty-nine per cent of victims said their stalker had physically intimidated them and in 21.5% of cases the stalker had used physical force.

In the United States, Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 8000 women and 8000 men, asking about their experiences of violence, including stalking. One in 12 of the women reported being stalked at least once, as did one in 45 of the men. Of those women who had been stalked, over half (59%) had been stalked by an ex-intimate, compared with 23% by a stranger (the corresponding figures for men were 30% and 36% respectively). A fifth of the women stalked by former partners reported that the stalking had begun before the relationship ended, 43% after the termination of the relationship, while 36% said it had occurred both before and after the relationship had ended. Men were more likely to be stalked by strangers and acquaintances. The mean total stalking period was longer in ex-intimate and intimate cases than in cases involving non-intimates (2.2 years, compared with 1.1 years).

The Tjaden and Thoennes survey also found a strong link between stalking and other forms of violence in intimate and ex-intimate relationships. For instance, 81% of women who were stalked by a former partner were also physically assaulted by him. Further, ex-husbands who stalked were significantly more likely than non-stalking ex-husbands to engage in controlling and emotionally abusive behaviour toward their wife while the relationship was still intact. These findings complement a survey of 120 respondents charged with domestic violence offences, of whom 30% self-reported stalking behaviours (Burgess et al., 1997). Further, Walker and Meloy (1998) state that anecdotal and clinical reports of domestic violence clearly show that far more abusive individuals ‘follow, harass, surveil (sic), and frighten their partners and ex-partners’ (p. 158) than are known to the criminal justice system. These figures testify to the importance of investigations into violence and relationship factors in stalking cases. As Burgess et al. (1997) note ‘Stalking behaviour is yet another repetitive interpersonal intrusive act that can have lethal consequences’ (p. 398).
Incidence of violence and the former victim–stalker relationship

Early research seemed to imply that stalkers were generally harmless obsessed individuals. Meloy (1997) reviewed 10 studies published between 1978 and 1995 where all participants had received criminal charges arising from their ‘obsessional following’. Meloy cited Monahan and Steadman’s (1994) statement that most obsessional followers were not prone to violence, and concluded that his review findings supported this view, with an overall rate of violence across the 10 studies of 8.5%. Meloy even cautioned that some of the violence rates included in his review had overstated the degree of violence present because certain participants had been specifically selected for study as a result of their aggressive behaviour.

As more systematic investigations have been conducted into a wider range of stalker behaviour, estimates as to the danger presented by stalkers have risen. Stalkers are now being seen as typically more dangerous, with domestic stalkers presenting the highest risk. Kienlen et al. (1997) found that 41% of their non-psychotic group of stalkers acted out violently, compared with 13% of their psychotic group (although the difference did not reach statistical significance owing to sample limitations). All violent incidents reported by Kienlen et al. involved former intimates with the exception of one stalker who had assaulted his mother.

Schwartz-Watts and Morgan (1998) reviewed the medical records of 42 individuals who had been charged with stalking in South Carolina. Violent and non-violent stalkers were assessed on a range of variables to see if there were any associations with stalker violence. The only finding that approached statistical significance was that violent stalkers were more likely to have had a previous attachment to their victims, in that 16 of the 20 violent stalkers had had an ‘amorous attachment’ to their target.

Using a similar sample, Harmon et al. (1998) reviewed the cases of 175 individuals who were referred to a New York forensic psychiatry clinic after being charged with stalking and harassment-related offences. Cases were divided into non-violent (54%, or 94) or violent categories (46%, or 81), where ‘any incidence of documented physical aggression was considered to be an indicator of violence’ (p. 240), then further divided on the basis of the prior relationship between harasser and victim: ‘intimate’, ‘acquaintance’, or ‘none’ (intimate also included familial relationships). Analyses showed that intimate harassers were most likely to carry out violent acts: 49% had exhibited violent behaviour in this category, compared with 25% in the acquaintance, and 7% in the no prior relationship subgroup. It is worth noting that this study incorporated a broader definition of ‘violence’ than did the other research cited here. The definitions of violence employed do vary considerably, and these differences can be expected to influence rates of reported violence between samples.

Zona et al. (1993) developed a lasting typology of stalkers based on 74 police case files. They found that whilst only two of the 74 had physically
assaulted their victims, both were from their ‘simple obsessional’ category – the only grouping where there existed an actual prior relationship between stalker and victim. Zona et al. later reiterated (1998) that the simple obsessional grouping were ‘the most dangerous’ and that many of these stalking cases had followed domestic violence.

Palarea et al. (1999) analysed 223 stalker and victim pairs who had a prior relationship. Cases were divided into those who had a former intimate relationship (married, engaged, cohabiting, dating, casual sexual relationship) and those who had shared a non-intimate relationship (e.g. workmates, neighbours, clients). Former intimate stalkers were twice as likely to threaten their victims as non-intimate harassers, and significantly more likely to commit physical violence and damage property. Further, threats which were followed by actual physical violence were four times more likely to be made by former intimates.

Mullen et al. (1999) conducted a study of 145 Australian stalkers who had attended a forensic psychiatric clinic. They found that ‘resentful’ and ‘rejected’ stalkers were most likely to threaten their victims, and rejected stalkers were those most likely to carry out assaults. ‘Rejected’ stalkers also tended to harass their victims for longer than the other subtypes (‘intimacy seeking’, ‘incompetent’, ‘resentful’ and ‘predatory’) and had in most cases responded to the rejection of a relationship by an ex-partner. Specific psychiatric diagnoses were not found to be significantly associated with threats or violence, but non-psychotic stalkers were more likely to commit assaults. Farnham et al. (2000) echoed this finding after assessing 50 British stalkers who were awaiting trial. Stalkers were sexual intimates, acquaintances or strangers and serious violence against victims was defined as assault occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm, wounding, attempted murder and murder. Former sexual intimates were by far the most violent subgroup, with a violence rate of 70%. The authors concluded that ‘the greatest danger of serious violence from stalkers in the UK is not from strangers or from people with psychotic illness, but from non-psychotic ex partners’ (p. 199).

The studies cited above were all based on contact with or on archival data pertaining to stalkers. Other studies have focused on the accounts of the victims of stalking, and this approach has certain advantages. Ex-partner stalkers may have been under-represented in some previous works, probably as the result of the exclusive focus on erotomaniac disorders in early studies (Meloy, 1997). This exclusion may also reflect a selection bias on the part of police to arrest and prosecute more ‘high profile’ or ‘stranger’ stalkers: similar trends in prosecution have been observed in child sexual abuse cases (Davies and Noon, 1991). Victim-based studies may be able to avoid these problems and present a perhaps more realistic picture. The major benefits of victim accounts are the wealth and range of data that may be obtained from persons who may or may not have reported their experiences to the authorities. Mullen et al. (2000) stated that stalking victims are ‘the most reliable source of information
about intimidation, threats and violence’ (p. 214). The associated disadvantage is that their reports may not always be forensically validated. Further, such victim pools may only contain those individuals who have self-referred to clinics or victim support groups, thereby biasing the results towards the more extreme end of the stalking spectrum.

Despite sampling differences, victim-based studies have also found that it is ex-intimates who tend to present the highest risk of violence toward their victims. Pathé and Mullen (1997) provided the first substantive victim study, based on a group of 100 victims who had been assessed at a specialist clinic. Of these 100, ex-intimate stalkers made up 29% of the sample, 16% were strangers and 55% could be described as acquaintances. The authors found that violence had occurred in significantly more cases when the stalker was an ex-intimate. Hall (1998) studied 145 victims of stalking who responded to a series of advertisements across the USA. Over half of their harassers (57%) were described as ‘post intimate relationship stalkers’, 6% as strangers, and 35% as prior acquaintances. Hall did not provide figures on the incidence of violence between these relational subgroups, but she did state that 38% of the overall sample had been hit or beaten, and 22% reported having been sexually assaulted.

Mullen et al. (2000) stated in a review that ex-intimate stalkers are ‘the largest category, the commonest victim profile being a woman who has previously shared an intimate relationship with her (usually male) stalker’ (p. 44). They reported that the victims of ex-intimates are subject to the broadest range of harassment methods, and that ‘repeated phone calls and persistent following, threats and violence are more likely to be experienced by this group’. They further suggested that stalkers with whom the victim had a brief romantic episode are less likely to be violent toward their victims because longer-term ex-partner stalkers have a greater emotional investment.

Current study

The present study set out to compare the frequency of violent acts perpetrated by ex-intimate, acquaintance and stranger stalkers in a sample of 95 British self-defined stalking victims. The current study considers violence by stalkers not only against the primary target of the stalker’s attentions, but also toward the victim’s acquaintances and relatives. It has already been noted that stalkers do not limit themselves to assaulting their victims: ‘The most likely victim of violence is the object of pursuit, probably at least 80% of the time. Third parties perceived as impeding access to the object of pursuit are the next most likely victim pool’ (Meloy, 1997, p. 27). It was predicted that ex-intimate stalkers would have a higher violence rate than acquaintance or stranger stalkers. The opportunity was also taken to investigate correlates of stalker violence in each of these subgroups.
Method

Participants

This is a descriptive study of a non-random sample of convenience of a cohort of stalking victims. Respondents were 95 individuals who had contacted the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, a London-based charity concerned with the promotion of personal safety. When persons approached the Trust to complain of being stalked and to ask for advice, they were sent a questionnaire to complete, and the data derive from this. The majority of victims had heard about the Trust from newspaper reports that mentioned its work and aims, namely 'to create a safer society and enable people to live safer lives, providing practical personal safety advice for everyone, everyday, everywhere'.

The 95 victims came from a wide cross-section of the British and Northern Irish community, but it cannot be assumed that they were representative of all stalking victims in the population. This is because the victims self-referred to the Trust, and as such they may represent a group who are more motivated or more severely affected by their experiences than are most victims of stalking. Their actual stalking experience may also have differed from that of those who did not self-refer; for instance, they may have been subjected to higher rates of violence. Although the precise response rate is unknown, Trust staff estimated it to be around 90%. The 95 victims were chosen from a sample of 102: seven were excluded as the author had doubts as to the veracity of their accounts. For instance, the claims that they made were unlikely, if not impossible (e.g. remote harassment by aliens, thought transference via electrical equipment owned by the respondent). Pathé, Mullen and Purcell (1999) identified five categories of false claimants of stalking, or ‘pseudovictims’, one of which encompassed severe mental disorder with persecutory or erotomanic delusions.

The research instrument

The questionnaire completed by respondents covered such issues as: basic demographic details for both victim and stalker, the nature of their prior relationship (if any), whether the stalker acted alone and had stalked before, whether the stalker had recruited others to aid his/her campaign, location of the harassment, duration and frequency of stalking, specific behaviours targeted toward the victim, perceived reason for the stalking, the victim’s reaction, the response of the authorities, and action taken by the victim and its consequences.

Additional pages were provided at the end of the questionnaire for respondents to add any further information or comments of their choosing.

Thresholds and definitions

All 95 victims whose data were included in the analyses were judged by Pathé and Mullen’s (1997) criteria to be victims of stalking. That is, they had
experienced repeated, unwanted intrusions via following, surveillance, approaches, and communications by letter, telephone or electronic mail. All 95 victims had described multiple episodes of harassment (10 or more, in line with Mullen, Pathé, Purcell and Stuart’s 1999 refined definition) which lasted for a minimum of one month, and which had involved more than one form of intrusive behaviour.

In earlier works, terms such as ‘intimate’ and ‘acquaintance’ have not been consistently applied. For instance, Harmon et al. (1998) included familial relationships in their ‘intimate’ category, whilst Palarea et al. (1999) did not. In this study, victims were placed in the ‘ex-intimate’ grouping if they had had a prior romantic relationship (boyfriend/girlfriend or spousal) with their stalker. Those in the ‘stranger’ group had had no contact with their stalker prior to the onset of their harassment, or at least none that they knew of. The ‘acquaintance’ subset had been targeted by their neighbours (15 cases), work colleagues (8), work clients (8), students (2), social contacts (2) and friends (1).

The questionnaire included a section entitled ‘perpetrator behaviour’. Here, respondents were provided with a list of behaviours and were asked to indicate those that had been directed toward them by the perpetrator of their harassment. Those most relevant to this study included: ‘threatened me with violence’, ‘physically assaulted me’, ‘sexually assaulted me’, ‘attempted to kill me’, ‘physically assaulted a member of my family, a friend or partner’, ‘threatened a member of my family, a friend or partner with violence’. Thus, terms such as ‘attempted murder’ and ‘threat of violence’ were not explicitly defined, and it was left to respondents themselves to decide whether they and/or those close to them had experienced threats and attacks.

Analyses

A series of chi-square tests were carried out between victim–stalker prior relationship and a number of variables pertaining to the stalker’s activities and the victim’s response. In an attempt to understand more about possible linkages between aspects of stalker violence, a number of Pearson product-moment correlations were carried out between the data on physical assaults and the data on several other violence-related variables. Not all variables were exhaustively correlated with one another. Rather, attention focused on the relationships that had been highlighted in previous investigations.

Results

Victims

Eighty-seven of the victims (92%) were female and seven (7%) were male. A married couple were together classified as ‘one’ victim (1%), because this was
how they had chosen to complete the questionnaire. The age range of victims when the stalking began was two (24 months) to 70 years (mean 33.74, SD 11.81). Three victims (3%) said that they were aged 14 or less when the stalking began and two (2%) that they were aged between 69 and 70. The majority of cases (87, or 91.6%) were reported to the police, and 34 victims (36.1%) had successfully prosecuted their stalker.

**Incidence of violence and former victim–stalker relationship**

Almost half of the stalkers (49%, or 47) were ex-partners of the victim, 34% (36) were former acquaintances, and 11% (12) were strangers. The incidence of physical assaults carried out by stalkers was found to be 45% for ex-intimates, 14% for former acquaintances, and 33% for stranger stalkers ($\chi^2 (2) = 15.69, p < 0.001$).

**Frequency of violent acts across prior relationship subgroups**

The finding above relates to actual physical assaults only. The questionnaire asked respondents if they had experienced more specific acts of violence. Across prior relationship subgroups, 16% of the 95 victims (15) said that they had experienced a physical assault, but no other specific violent act. Nine (10%) reported that their stalker had tried to kill them, but had not carried out any other violent acts. Thirteen (14%) said that their stalker had physically assaulted them and made an attempt on their life. Just 22 of the victims had been asked whether they had been sexually assaulted by their stalker. Of these, two said they had, and they also reported that their stalker had physically assaulted them and attempted to kill them. Over half of the victims (60%, or 55) said that they had experienced none of these acts at the hands of their stalker.

**Analyses of victim–stalker prior relationship with additional variables**

Differences between the relational subgroups

The research questionnaire asked victims to indicate whether or not their stalker had engaged in a range of intrusive activities. Respondents were also asked detailed questions about the course and nature of their stalking and about their own reaction to it. The significant findings on the relationships between stalking behaviour and degree of prior intimacy are detailed in Table 1.

Overall, the results detailed in Table 1 suggest that ex-intimate stalkers were the most intrusive in their approach, and that victims were most proactive in trying to curtail the stalking when their harasser was an ex-partner. Of the three subgroups, former intimates were significantly more likely to assault their victim, threaten third parties, try to access victim-related information from third parties, trespass on the victim’s property, and contact the victim by phone and by mail. Acquaintance stalkers carried out harassing behaviours to a greater extent than...
Table 1: Prior victim–stalker relationship and stalker–victim variables: significant chi-square analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ex-intimate</th>
<th>Former acquaintance</th>
<th>Stranger</th>
<th>Overall mean</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stalker physically assaulted victim</td>
<td>45% (21)</td>
<td>14% (5)</td>
<td>33% (4)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>&lt;.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker tried to kill victim</td>
<td>36% (17)</td>
<td>14% (5)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker threatened third parties</td>
<td>53% (25)</td>
<td>28% (10)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>&lt;.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker approached and talked to victim</td>
<td>83% (39)</td>
<td>61% (22)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>19.52</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker trespassed on victim's property</td>
<td>79% (37)</td>
<td>53% (19)</td>
<td>75% (9)</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>&lt;.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker made silent telephone calls</td>
<td>70% (33)</td>
<td>44% (16)</td>
<td>42% (5)</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>&lt;.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker made conversational telephone calls</td>
<td>77% (36)</td>
<td>47% (17)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>16.79</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker made abusive/offensive phone calls</td>
<td>64% (30)</td>
<td>25% (9)</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>14.52</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker had mixed telephone style</td>
<td>72% (34)</td>
<td>33% (12)</td>
<td>33% (4)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>24.65</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e engaged in both the above two behaviours)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker sent begging/pleading letters</td>
<td>68% (32)</td>
<td>19% (7)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>23.59</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker had mixed letter style</td>
<td>38% (18)</td>
<td>17% (6)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10.55</td>
<td>&lt;.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e alternated pleasant and offensive content)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker sent gifts</td>
<td>64% (30)</td>
<td>42% (15)</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>7.58</td>
<td>&lt;.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker used obscene language</td>
<td>64% (30)</td>
<td>42% (15)</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>7.58</td>
<td>&lt;.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker tried to access victim information from third parties</td>
<td>85% (40)</td>
<td>78% (28)</td>
<td>42% (5)</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>10.17</td>
<td>&lt;.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim tried to reason with stalker</td>
<td>68% (32)</td>
<td>53% (19)</td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>10.46</td>
<td>&lt;.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker assisted by stalker's family/friends</td>
<td>32% (14)</td>
<td>44% (16)</td>
<td>55% (4)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim spoke to stalker's family</td>
<td>40% (19)</td>
<td>19% (7)</td>
<td>8% (1)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>&lt;.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim tried to obtain a civil injunction</td>
<td>45% (21)</td>
<td>28% (10)</td>
<td>8% (1)</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>&lt;.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker breached civil injunction</td>
<td>26% (12)</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
<td>8% (1)</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10.87</td>
<td>&lt;.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalker convicted for stalking activities</td>
<td>39% (18)</td>
<td>14% (5)</td>
<td>55% (4)</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>&lt;.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sample size = 95 in all cases, df = 2 in all cases. The numbers in parentheses seen in columns two to four represent the $n$ numbers for each cell. The percentage values represent the overall percentage of each subgroup who were scored positive on each variable.
stranger stalkers, but less frequently than the ex-intimates. Stranger stalkers had
two distinctions: they were most likely to be assisted by their family and friends
in their campaign and they had the highest rate of criminal conviction.

Similarities between the relational subgroups

There were a number of variables that were not found to be significantly asso-
ciated with prior victim–stalker relationship. Non-significant chi-square
analyses were found for prior relationship and victim age when the stalking
began; stalker age when the stalking began; whether the stalker had stalked
anyone else; and the total duration of stalking involvement. Other aspects of
stalker behaviour not found to be associated with prior relationships included:
following and watching the victim; telephoning and then hanging up; sending
threatening, abusive or conversational mail; defaming the victim's character;
making counter-allegations of stalking; trying to join the victim's social circle;
involving the victim's family; bugging the victim's home; sending malicious
gifts and, finally, escalation of the stalking behaviour over time. Whether the
victim had altered his/her behaviour as a result of stalking, and whether the
victim had reported the case to the police were also found not to be signifi-
cantly associated with prior relationship.

A number of violence-related variables were not found to be statistically
associated with prior stalker–victim relationship. These were, whether the
stalker had threatened the victim; sexually assaulted the victim; physically
assaulted the victim's family/friends; damaged the inside or outside of the vic-
tim's home; damaged the victim's car; or stolen from the victim.

Correlates of violence

Threats and violence

Threats of physical assault were found to be significantly correlated with actual
physical assaults ($r (95) = 0.24$, $p = 0.02$), as were threats and murder
attempts ($r (95) = 0.16$, $p = 0.01$). By contrast, sexual threats and actual sexual
assaults were not significantly associated.

There was a significant relationship between threats made to third parties
and associated assaults on third parties ($r (95) = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). A strong
correlation also existed between threats made to the victim and threats made
toward third parties ($r (95) = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$).

Escalation

No significant associations were found between escalation of stalking over
time (as perceived by the victim) and threats, physical and sexual assaults,
murder attempts, or threats and assaults on third parties.
Interpersonal and property violence

The frequency of physical assaults did not correlate with damage to the victim’s car, home, or other property.

Violence and criminal charges

As noted earlier, the stalker’s activities led to successful prosecution for stalking and stalking-related offences in 34 cases (36.1%). Frequency of criminal conviction was significantly associated with physical assaults on the victim ($r_{95} = 0.35, p = 0.001$) and threats made to third parties ($r_{95} = 0.32, p = 0.002$) but not with sexual assaults or attempted murder of the victim, assaults on third parties, or threats made to the victim.

Criminal conviction of stalkers was, however, associated with damage to the inside of the victim’s property ($r_{95} = 0.21, p = 0.05$), vandalism to the outside of the victim’s property ($r_{95} = 0.27, p = 0.009$) and damage to the victim’s car ($r_{95} = 0.26, p = 0.01$).

Effects of stalking

The sample had been provided with a list of adjectives and were simply asked to tick the one which best described how the stalking had made them feel. However, 41% (39) were unable to choose one particular adjective, and instead explicitly stated that they had experienced them all. Of those who were able to choose one emotion, the most frequent choice was ‘fear’ (18%), followed by ‘terrorized’ (15%). All of the remaining adjectives were chosen less frequently, i.e.: ‘intimidation’ (7%), ‘imprisoned’ (5%), ‘powerlessness’ (4%), ‘upset’ (4%), ‘anger’ (3%), and ‘loss of self-esteem’ (2%). There were no significant differences between adjectives chosen by victims who had been physically assaulted and those who had not.

Discussion

Overall, the findings would suggest that the 95 respondents constituted a group with a high violence risk, with almost half having been the victim of a physical or sexual assault, a murder attempt, or combinations of these acts. This figure is substantially higher than the overall violence rate of 8.5% reported by Meloy (1997), and closer to more recent figures. For instance, 46% of Harmon et al.’s (1998) stalkers had been violent toward their victims, as had 36% of Mullen et al.’s (1999) sample. As predicted, a higher proportion of ex-partner stalkers were found to act out violently than was the case for acquaintance and stranger stalkers. This finding with a British victim sample confirms earlier studies conducted in Australia and North America (e.g. Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Harmon et al., 1998).
Analyses of the degree of prior intimacy between stalker and victim and a host of additional variables presented a multi-faceted picture. Ex-partner stalkers utilized the widest range of harassment methods (Mullen et al., 2000), and directed the most polarized activities – most benign and most threatening – toward their target. For instance, they were the most likely subgroup to send letters with ‘pleasant’ content and to make conversational telephone calls, but they were also the most likely to try to kill their victims and make offensive or abusive telephone calls. Stranger stalkers appeared to engage in the narrowest range of harassing activities, but they were the most likely group to be assisted by family and friends in their campaign. This was surprising, given that 42% of the acquaintance stalking cases had come about as a result of neighbourhood disputes, where there may be a higher expectation that groups of harassers would be operating together. The question of whether the present finding has any wider currency or whether it is erroneous and due perhaps to amplification in the reports of distracted victims cannot be satisfactorily answered here owing to sample limitations (there were but 12 stranger stalkers).

Acquaintance stalkers did not have any particularly distinctive features. They were less likely than stranger stalkers to physically attack their victims, but were more likely than strangers to threaten third parties, make telephone calls, and send gifts and letters. Thus, there was no clear positive trend between the degree of prior intimacy between victim and stalker and the extent of the violence perpetrated by the stalker (although such a trend was seen in terms of the overall level of intrusion). This trend was also present in terms of the steps taken by victims to curtail the stalking. Victims were most likely to speak to the stalker and his/her relatives in an attempt to alleviate the situation if their stalker was an ex-partner, and least likely to do so if their stalker was a stranger. Some of the above findings could have quite prosaic explanations. Ex-intimate stalkers, for example, may be more likely than acquaintances and strangers to telephone their victims simply because they are more likely to have access to the victim’s telephone numbers. Similarly, victims who know their stalker well may feel more confident in trying to reason with him/her and his/her family in an effort to resolve the situation.

Along with the differences found between the relational subgroups, a number of similarities were also seen. These non-significant findings may be due, at least in part, to the size of the sample. The very low number of respondents who had experienced some of the behaviours (such as sexual assault) did not allow a robust statistical analysis of further possible differences between stalker subgroups. Additional analyses of such similarities and differences need to be conducted with a larger pool of stalking victims before any firm conclusions can be reached. There is, however, at least one alternative explanation for the non-significant findings. It may be that there exists a ‘core’ of factors and behaviours that are common to the majority of stalking cases, regardless of the prior victim–stalker relationship. Instances of both watching and following
were not found to differ significantly across stalker subgroups and this was because these behaviours were experienced by almost all victims. Escalation over time was also found to be a common feature across almost all cases included in this study, but this was perhaps because the sample were sufficiently alarmed to contact the charitable trust in the first instance. Further investigations with more representative samples may clarify whether there are indeed a set of 'core' factors that are common to the majority of stalking cases, despite the degree of prior intimacy between victim and stalker.

A number of statistically significant interrelations were found between aspects of stalker threats and violence. In short, these correlations indicated that when stalkers threaten their victims with violence or murder they should be taken seriously, as should threats made by stalkers toward third parties. Threats and assault in any form were not found to be related to the victim's perceived intensification of the stalking, suggesting that law enforcement should not 'wait and see' how a case develops, but should instead play an active role from an early stage. Although criminal convictions were associated with physical assaults on the victim and threats made to third parties, they were not correlated with other forms of threat, assault or attempted murder. Convictions were, however, related to vandalism and property damage.

In this sample, there were no significant differences between the nature of the victim–stalker former relationship and whether the victim reported the case to the police, but there was a significant difference in conviction rates. Strangers who were violent were most likely to incur a criminal conviction, followed by ex-intimates who vandalized the property of their victim. It would be of interest to investigate what 'stalkers' are actually being charged with, especially given that the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 offers no firm definition of what constitutes stalking. Overall, acquaintance stalkers were those least likely to be convicted. This is a finding that warrants concern, given the strength of evidence that exists to argue that levels of stalker violence are positively related to closeness of former victim–stalker relationship. However, there is at least one alternative explanation. It may be (although this is purely speculative) that although violence perpetuated by acquaintances is rare, when it does occur, it is more severe and therefore more likely to warrant serious repercussions. Alternatively, it may be that stranger cases are erroneously viewed by the legal authorities as far more dangerous than ex-intimate cases (see e.g. Davies and Noon, 1991; Meloy, 1997). Further analyses of other samples of actual stalking cases are necessary to resolve these issues.

There is a real need for thorough examination of the impact that stalking has on its victims. The current study did not investigate this area in any detail, and it did not test for the presence or absence of mental disturbance or illness in the victim. It may be argued that stalking is unlike many other intrusive crimes in that by its very nature it does not constitute a single distressing event. Rather, stalking often takes place over an extended time period. It may be expected, then, that the psychological toll that stalking has on its victims
may differ from that experienced by the victims of other crimes that are intrusive or violent, but tend to occur just once and for a relatively short duration. The present work did ask the sample to choose an adjective that best described how the stalking made them feel. It is of note that although 33% chose ‘fear(ful)’ or ‘terrorized’, 41% stated that their experiences had made them feel fearful, terrorized, intimidated, imprisoned, powerless, upset and angry, as well as resulting in a loss of self-esteem. The psychological effect of stalking is an area of investigation that deserves immediate attention, as any results are likely to be of use to practitioners who work with the victims of this protracted and insidious crime.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations present in the current work that need to be noted. Although the findings did replicate those from previous investigations that were based on both stalker case files and victim accounts, the present respondents were victims who had contacted a national charity with a known interest in stalking. It may be that because of their self-referred nature, this sample may represent more motivated victims or those who have experienced more severe and prolonged harassment. As such, the sample is unlikely to represent all levels of stalking experience and so generalizations may not be appropriate for all victims of stalking in the British population. Even so, it can be argued that victims who are more motivated to report their experiences and who have encountered perhaps the most extreme forms of stalking are most likely to be those who come to the attention of the legal authorities and clinicians, as with previous samples cited in the introduction.

A further limitation of the study concerns the presence of possible confounding variables. For instance, it may be that the ex-partner stalkers in this sample had higher rates of past conviction compared with acquaintance or stranger stalkers, or that stranger stalkers were more likely to suffer from mental illnesses that might impact on their capacity for violence. Indeed, categorizing the dangerousness presented by stalkers according to prior relationship alone cannot allow an illustration of the diverse psychopathology and motivations of different stalkers (e.g. Mullen et al., 2000).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the current study has supported previous findings that ex-intimate stalkers act out violently toward their victims more often than do acquaintance or stranger stalkers, using a victim-based sample from the United Kingdom. There is a need to further consider variations in conviction rates resulting from stalkers with differing prior relationships to their victim. At present, these do not appear to be associated with the level of violence likely to have occurred. The present study has also highlighted the urgent
need to consider the potentially considerable physical danger and psychological distress experienced by the victims of stalking.

References


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