Stalking the stalker: a profile of offenders.


"Stalkers are like naughty third graders. They don't care what kind of attention they get, as long as it's attention." (1) Individuals unfamiliar with the phenomenon of stalkers and stalking often are surprised that stalkers may value negative attention just as much as they do positive attention. Why would anyone want to have a relationship with another person who does not want to be involved? The answer to this question can help law enforcement personnel understand stalking situations more clearly and aid them in facing the growing challenge of detecting and investigating such incidents.

Statistics

Stereotypically linked by much of the general public with the "rich and famous," until very recently, most information concerning stalking came from media accounts of incidents, individual case studies, or academic endeavors that focused on one narrow facet of the problem. In the early 1990s, the most often quoted figures showed that 5 percent of women in the United States were stalked at some point during their lifetimes and about 200,000 were victims each year. However, estimates based on the first national study on stalking presented in 1998 found that rates were substantially higher. (2) This survey of 8,000 women and 8,000 men concluded that, nationwide, 8.1 percent of women have been stalked at some time during their lives and 1,006,970 are stalked annually. These figures are 1.6 times and 5 times, respectively, higher than those expressed during the early 1990s. In addition, this study revealed that 2.2 percent of men had experienced stalking during their lifetimes and that 370,990 become victims each year.

The first national study also shed some light on how common stalking is compared with other types of violence in the United States. In a 1-year period, the study estimated that women were two times as likely to be physically assaulted than stalked, but three times more likely to be stalked
than sexually assaulted. Thus, in terms of frequency, stalking falls in between the other two crimes, (3) although stalking situations may include one or both of these behaviors. Overall, however, despite the increasing importance of stalking, it remains a comparatively unexamined source of criminal behavior. Therefore, the law enforcement community may gain some insight into stalking by reviewing the growing literature on the topic, with special emphasis on profiling characteristics of stalkers and the various typologies and psychological motivations of such offenders.

Definition

Many different definitions of stalking exist in the literature with most defining the practice as including a pattern of harassing or menacing behaviors linked with a threat. (4) The first national study defined stalking as "... a course of conduct directed at a specific person that involves repeated visual or physical proximity; nonconsensual communication; verbal, written, or implied threats; or a combination thereof that would cause fear in a reasonable person (with repeated meaning on two or more occasions)." (5)

Every state in America, as well as the District of Columbia, have passed antistalking legislation, (6) whereas Canada commonly refers to stalking as "criminal harassment." (7) Because antistalking laws vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, law enforcement officers should familiarize themselves with the elements of the law in their specific jurisdictions. (8)

In addition, federal laws, such as the 1994 Violence Against Women Act and the Interstate Stalking Punishment and Prevention Act of 1996, may affect stalking cases. In some instances, stalking behaviors may violate federal law when offenders cross state lines to stalk a person or when they enter or leave federal property or Indian country for the purpose of stalking someone. These relatively new pieces of legislation provide powerful tools to address these criminal behaviors.

Behaviors

For many reasons, stalking behaviors are quite diverse. Stalkers may ambush their targets, phone repeatedly, pursue or follow their targets, make obscene or threatening phone calls, display weapons, trespass, or vandalize property. (9) They may send numerous letters, deliver unwanted gifts, or restrain or confine the objects of their obsessions. As a means of controlling the behavior of their targets, stalkers may threaten to commit suicide or harm the
victims, the victims' families, or even the victims' pets. Perpetrators may attempt to limit the amount of contact targets have with their families and friends and may insist on knowing the whereabouts of targets and what they are doing at all times. What they all have in common, however, is a persistent pattern of unwanted behaviors that interfere with other persons' abilities to control their own lives.

A relatively new form of stalking, cyberstalking, uses computers to stalk individuals and may take the form of electronic mail, faxes, or harassment in Internet chat rooms. For example, in one recent incident, a woman in San Francisco received about 1,500 pages of e-mails and faxes over a 2-month period that threatened her life and those of her children. Governmental authorities find it difficult to estimate how many individuals are victims of cyber-stalking, although they also note that the number of complaints concerning this type of unwanted contact have increased in recent years. In addition, such cases prove hard to prosecute successfully. (10)

In stalking cases, a precipitating event occurs 80 percent of the time. (11) Such situations may include the breakup of a relationship, the loss of a job, the death of a parent, or the onset of a serious illness. Stalkers may blame their victims, and their actions may result from anger associated with the initial incident.

Stalking ceases for a variety of reasons. The first national stalking study found that the victims (19 percent) or the stalkers (7 percent) moved; the stalkers acquired new love interests (18 percent); the police warned them to stop (15 percent); the victims talked to their stalkers (10 percent); the authorities made arrests (9 percent); the stalkers received help (6 percent) or died (4 percent); the victims obtained new love interests (4 percent); the stalking just stopped (3 percent); or the perpetrators were convicted of a crime (1 percent). Four percent of the cases remained unclassified. (12) Another source suggested that a 2-year period with no stalking activity is a successful intervention; (13) however, if the stalker is incarcerated during that 2-year period, investigators should not make the assumption that the stalker will be released with no risk of renewed stalking efforts.

Offenders

Generally, existing research has focused on the psychological perspectives of stalkers and has ignored their socioeconomic characteristics. One notable
exception occurred in a study of 187 female victims of intimate relationship stalking in Pennsylvania. (14) This study found that the stalkers ranged in age from 17 to 57 and described 57 percent as non-Hispanic whites, 37 percent as African-Americans, and 6.5 percent as other racial minorities. Of the 100 stalkers whose education the victims knew, 77 percent had at least attended high school and 45 percent had attended college; however, educational background ranged from some level of elementary school through graduation from a doctoral program. Interestingly, this research noted that stalkers with higher educational levels were less likely to be violent and also less inclined to make explicit threats. (15) As to occupations, 69 percent of the perpetrators were employed, with 62 percent of those described as holding blue-collar jobs compared with 37 percent in white-collar positions. In addition, 61.7 percent of stalkers had some form of a previous criminal record, and, of those individuals, 31 percent had a prior conviction for a violent offense. Also, according to their targets, 72 percent of the stalkers abused alcohol or other drugs. Sixty-five percent of the women reported physical abuse during their relationships, with two-thirds (66 percent) stating that alcohol or other drug use was the precipitating event for that violence. While this profile reveals some interesting information, it remains important to remember that it resulted from a study in a single state.

According to the findings of the first national stalking study, approximately 87 percent of stalkers were male. (16) Men were identified as stalkers in 94 percent of cases in which the complainants were women and 60 percent of cases in which the targets were men. In addition, approximately 77 percent of female complainants and 64 percent of males knew their stalkers. These researchers speculated that men may know their stalkers less often because of other considerations, such as the involvement of gang rivalries. They also found that homosexual men may be more at risk for stalking. The greater risk may be due to unreturned sexual attraction or bias toward homosexuals.

Those persons who stalked men tended to be strangers or acquaintances, rather than intimates, such as former spouses, former boy or girlfriends, or former cohabiters. This finding is important in developing threat assessments because those persons who stalk strangers are more likely to be psychotic, while those who stalk sexual intimates are more inclined to abuse alcohol or other drugs and have a dependent personality disorder. (17)

Other research also has found that stalkers often are self-conscious and lack self-esteem. Many stalkers have menial jobs and tend to be unmarried and
live alone. They frequently have a history of being unable to sustain relationships, and they tend to use alcohol more than nonstalkers. Many stalkers have a history of prior stalking offenses, assaults, or substance abuse. (18)

Stalkers also may have mental disorders that commonly include not only substance dependence but also mood disorders and schizophrenia. (19) Others may have personality disorders, such as narcissism, paranoia, antisocial personalities, borderline personality disorders, dependent disorders, or histrionic personality disorders. If stalkers have a treatable psychiatric disorder, some may benefit from medications or psychotherapy. Those truly antisocial or psychopathic, however, may not benefit from treatment. In these cases, the stalkers must be separated from their victims for the stalking behaviors to cease.

When examining the lives of stalkers, common themes have emerged from one researcher's work often cited by other writers. (20) These have included a fascination with assassins and assassinations (e.g., the shooting of former president Ronald Reagan), death, suicide, obsessive love, a special or common destiny, and weapons. In addition, some stalkers excessively adhere to religious beliefs or practices and may believe that they are "cosmically connected" with their targets. Obviously, no single potential stalker will exhibit all of these themes. When noted by law enforcement personnel in combination with other typical stalking behaviors, such themes should serve as potential warning signs. In particular, law enforcement personnel should look for signs of behavior that are sinister, disjointed, bizarre, or extremely unreasonable. (21)

Typologies

Clearly, the phenomenon of stalking represents a unique nexus between psychiatry and psychology on the one hand and law enforcement on the other. "There is no single profile of a stalker.... Stalkers exhibit a broad range of behaviors, motivations, and psychological traits." (22) As a consequence, several typologies have emerged from the literature, each containing two to three categories, based typically on some form of personality disorder. For example, research has found that some stalkers have an "attachment disorder," stemming from abandonment in early childhood and resulting in the inability to maintain normal relationships as adults. In addition, many stalkers have a narcissistic personality in which
individuals have an inflated sense of self-worth and a need for others to focus on them. (23)

One of the best known classifications comes from a review of 74 cases in which researchers described stalkers as having erotomania, love obsession, or simple obsession. (24) Erotomania is the strong, but mistaken, belief that the stalker's object is in love with the stalker. Although the exact label may vary, a number of other researchers also have discussed this phenomenon. (25) In many instances, the victim does not know the stalker and almost always occupies an elevated station in life, making any true relationship between the two very unlikely. Usually, the only mental disorder affecting such stalkers is the delusion concerning the object of their attentions. Generally consisting of women who target males, this group represents the least dangerous of the three categories and included slightly under 10 percent of those studied. (26)

The second group, the love obsessional group, comprised approximately 43 percent of the sample. Ninety-seven percent of those were male stalkers, often between 30 and 40 years of age, with their victims usually between 20 and 30 years of age. Generally, these stalkers became aware of their targets through the media and did not know their victims directly. Twenty-five percent of these stalkers made threats to their objects, while only 3 percent carried out those threats.

Finally, the third group of stalkers, those having a simple obsession, included approximately 47.5 percent of those studied, 80 percent of whom were male. Generally, they were socially immature and unable to develop lasting relationships. The study found that such stalkers possibly exhibited traits that could include extreme jealousy, insecurity, paranoia, and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. These stalkers frequently were in relationships with their objects when those associations deteriorated or terminated, generally had an emotional attachment to their victims, and were unable to let the relationship end. If they could not restore those ties, they may have sought retribution or attempted to ensure that no one replaced them in their objects' affections. Simple obsessional stalkers also were more likely to harm their victims or their victims' properties. They also were willing to do whatever was necessary to achieve their goals. Substance abuse also was common. Ninety-seven percent of this group made threats, while 30 percent actually carried them out. Such stalking instances may be more short-lived than those in the other two categories.
Threat Assessment

Because stalking may precede violent crimes against persons or property, early recognition of these phenomena may provide opportunities for early intervention to prevent subsequent violence. "Threat assessment is the term used to describe the set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of target violence and its potential perpetrators." (27) Threats are not necessarily predictive in the sense that individuals being stalked always will become victims of violence; however, threats obviously may require further investigation.

For example, one researcher found that only about one-half of stalkers who threatened their victims actually acted on those threats. (28) In addition, even though 43 percent of men and 45 percent of women being stalked in that study received threats from their stalkers, interpersonal violence only occurred on average in 20 to 25 percent of the cases. Violence took the form of grabbing, punching, striking, or forcible fondling, but, reassuringly, homicide occurred in less than 2 percent of the stalking cases; however, this researcher also found that stalkers who had multiple stalking targets and who displayed serious antisocial behavior that was not related to their delusions may be at a very high risk for committing violence.

Researchers also have identified other risk enhancers. For example, one study of Hollywood celebrities found that victims were more at risk when stalkers corresponded with them for over 1 year; sought face-to-face contact; formed detailed, plausible plans; stated specific times, dates, and places that contact would occur; telephoned and wrote their victims; and sent them letters originating from more than one location. (29) In their correspondence with their targets, 36 percent of the stalkers referred to other celebrities. This has important consequences for those investigating such crimes. When one target is identified, careful investigation may identify others stalked by the same individual, either contemporaneously or in previous instances. Criminal record checks may help disclose whether the stalker has engaged in similar behaviors in the past.

Still, other characteristics of stalkers also may indicate a high risk for injury to their stalking targets. These include the possession! use of weapons, past instances of violence or hostage taking, a disregard for the consequences of violating protection orders, access to the victim or the victim's family,
known depression or suicidal tendencies, and histories of stalking victimizations, mental illness, or drug use. (30) Other indicators of high-risk stalkers may include present or past threats to kill the victim or others and a high degree of obsession, possessiveness, or jealousy. (31)

In contrast, other researchers found certain factors that were not predictive, despite common beliefs. (32) Generally, they did not find stalkers who communicated anonymously more dangerous than those who signed their communications. Also, no link existed between stalkers who harassed their targets with or without accompanying threats. Finally, no predictive value necessarily existed in distinguishing between those stalkers who threatened their victims and those stalkers who approached their targets.

Recent research in Colorado suggested that law enforcement officers may not recognize the link between domestic violence and stalking and the extent to which stalking may precede such episodes of abuse. This research found that 1 in 6, or 16.5 percent, of domestic violence crime reports contained evidence that the suspect had stalked the victim prior to the present occurrence of domestic violence. Officers typically used charges of harassment or violations of restraining orders, even though evidence existed in the case files to support requesting stalking charges. (33)

This research suggested that criminal codes concerning stalking may offer one valuable, yet underused, avenue to address stalking behaviors in domestic violence cases. When victims present complaints of harassing and threatening behaviors, officers always should ask whether these behaviors have occurred previously, so as to develop the pattern of behaviors necessary to sustain stalking charges. If officers ask these questions in all cases involving potential charges of harassment, terrorist threats, and violations of restraining orders, it is possible that, in some situations, interventions could help prevent later domestic violence.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of stalking is a complex one. Throughout the United States and Canada, law enforcement officials and researchers are intensifying their examinations of the various forms of stalking and its related criminal behaviors. Recent studies have revealed that stalking is more widespread than previous research of the early 1990s indicated.
In response to a number of highly publicized incidents, authorities have placed more attention on the development and implementation of legislation at the state and national levels. Researchers also have intensified their efforts to understand stalking behaviors, as well as the socioeconomic and psychological backgrounds of those involved. This has led to the development of a number of typologies and efforts concerning the accurate assessment of threats made by perpetrators. Law enforcement and other governmental authorities need to closely monitor these events as they encounter stalking, assess the threat that it presents, and develop their responses.

Stalking-Related Web Sites

Cyberangels
http://www.cyberangels.com
National Center for the Victims of Crime
http://www.ncvc.org/src
Working to Halt On-line Abuse (WHOA)
http://www.haltabuse.org
Stalking Victims Sanctuary
http://www.stalkingvictims.com
Survivors of Stalking
http://www.soshelp.org

Endnotes


(3.) Ibid., 4.


(5.) Supra note 2, 2.


(9.) Supra note 2, 1.


(12.) Supra note 2, 11-13.


(16.) Supra note 2, 5-7.

(17.) Supra note 11.


(22.) Supra note 11.

(21.) Ibid.

(23.) Supra note 11.


(26.) Supra note 24, 897 and 901.

(28.) Supra note 19, 182.

(29.) Supra note 20 (Dietz et al), 192-193, 195, and 207-208.


(32.) Supra note 20 (Dietz et al), 205-206.

(33.) Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, The Role of Stalking in Domestic Violence Crime Reports Generated by the Colorado Springs Police Department, presented to the National Institute of Justice, December 1999, ii.

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