

Commentary: Update on Assessing Risk for Violence Among Stalkers

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Thirteen years after its introduction as a prosecutable crime, stalking remains a public concern. Each year in the United States, approximately 1 million women and 371,000 men are stalked.¹ Research and clinical practice have revealed that some cases of stalking are associated with high rates of violence. The need for research on these violent offenders is critical. The following article is an overview of the history of stalking research, a review of significant research findings, and a review of what is not known.

History of Stalking Research

Stalking reached national attention during the 1990s in the United States with the murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer by Robert Bardo. Bardo used Department of Motor Vehicle records to locate Schaeffer's address. Another stalker had used similar methods to find and stab actress Theresa Saldana in 1982. Both of these acts occurred in California, which was the first state to enact antistalking legislation in 1990.² Since then, all states have enacted antistalking statutes, and a federal statute was passed in 1996.³ Stalking penalties are still minor in some states, while penalties are stiff in others. Many states have revised their stalking statutes. Some general modifications included removing a requirement that a threat be made, since some cases of stalking do not involve the making of a "credible threat." The black hole referred to as "reasonable fear" was replaced with the concept of causing fear in a reasonable person.

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Before stalking was codified as a crime, little research existed. Most were case studies about erotomanic individuals pursuing their love objects or treatises about courtship disorders. Even in the early 1990s, after stalking became a crime, no typologies existed, and researchers could not even agree whether to refer to offenders as obsessional followers, obsessional harassers, or stalkers. Despite the differences in terminology, most researchers agree that stalking is unwanted, repeated following or pursuit that creates fear or apprehension in the victim.

The beginning of a classification scheme was proposed by Zona *et al.*⁴ in 1993. They distinguished simple obsessional followers from love obsessional and erotomanic followers. Simple obsessional followers had had a relationship with their victims. Love obsessional stalkers were psychotic but did not believe they were loved back or they had other psychotic beliefs in addition to the love obsession. Those with erotomanic obsession believed they were loved back. This classification scheme is still in use, and research is ongoing using that model.

Harmon *et al.*⁵ classified 48 stalkers from the Forensic Clinic of the Criminal and Supreme Courts of New York in 1995, according to the nature of the stalker's attachment (angry vs. amorous) or by the type of relationship with the victim (professional, personal, media, employment, media acquaintance, none, or unknown). Although this was a workable model for both assessments and treatments, this classification model does not enjoy the widespread use that the Threat Management Unit model or the Mullen Classification Scheme has received.⁶

By 1999, a classification system was proposed by Mullen⁶ *et al.* who studied 145 stalkers in Australia. Mullen's subtypes included the rejected, the resentful, the predator, the intimacy seekers, and the in-

competent. The rejected group ($n = 52$) stalked because of a sense of rejection at the end of a relationship. Personality disorders were the most prevalent feature. The resentful group ($n = 16$) stalked to frighten their victims. Many of the predatory stalkers ($n = 6$) were paraphiliacs, stalking while planning an attack. Intimacy seekers ($n = 49$) searched for intimacy with their love objects. This group was predominantly delusional. The incompetent ($n = 22$) stalked because of deficits in social function or because of cognitive impairments. This classification system was extremely helpful for management in treatment settings.

While classification systems were beginning to be developed as a tool for research, studies began to focus on the epidemiology of stalking. In 1998, The National Violence Against Women Survey¹ published enlightening details of victimization by stalkers. This study was a telephone survey of 8,000 men and 8,000 women in the United States. Respondents indicated whether anyone had ever spied on them, sent them unsolicited letters, made unsolicited phone calls, stood outside their home or work, showed up at the same places without a reason, tried to communicate with them against their will, vandalized their property, or destroyed something they loved. These reports had to have occurred more than once and had to frighten the victim to be classified as stalking. The survey indicated eight percent of adult females and two percent of adult males reported they had been stalked and that 1 in 20 women would be stalked in their lifetimes. The study showed women were the most likely victims of stalking; however, 22 percent of men reported victimization. There were high rates of domestic violence in women stalked by former intimates with 805 reporting a previous assault. A previous epidemiological study in Australia in 1996 had similar findings, showing that 15 percent of 6,300 women reported being stalked at some time in their lives.⁷ The alarming factor from these epidemiological findings are the low rates (less than 50%) of reporting these episodes to law enforcement.

What Is Known about Stalking?

To date, several books and articles have been published in scientific journals concerning stalking. A Google.com search using the words stalking and psychiatry yields more than 1,500 results. What is known about stalking has been fairly consistent among researchers, with a few outlying factors. More

detail will be given regarding studies that are cited more frequently in the literature or those with novel findings. One of the earliest findings in research came from Zona *et al.*² This study examined 74 case files from the Los Angeles Police Department Threat Management Unit, which was developed in 1990 to investigate harassment cases. They compared persons with simple obsessional, love obsessional, and erotomanic stalkers, looking for differences among the groups. These groups were not compared with general offenders and the only statistically significant findings were that erotomanic followers tended to be women and foreign born. The sample size of erotomanic followers was extremely small.

Reid Meloy⁸ compared 20 stalkers to 30 general offenders with mental disorders from records of the Superior Court of San Diego and found the stalkers to be males, unmarried, and older with better-than-average educations. This was the first study known to this researcher that compared stalkers with other offenders. These findings were confirmed in other studies.^{5,8} Later studies focused on classifying stalkers based on attributes such as whether they were psychotic or not⁹ and the nature of their attachment to the victim.⁵

Soon, research began to focus on identifying risk factors to determine whether stalkers would become violent. Early studies showed that the likelihood of violence increased if the stalker and victim had been intimate.¹⁰ These findings were confirmed by later studies.

The antecedents of studying what factors increase the risk of violence among stalkers date back to the seminal study by Dietz *et al.*¹¹ and our prior study¹² in which letters to members of Congress and Hollywood celebrities who were approached were compared with other letters in cases in which the target was not approached. From studying 86 letters to members of Congress, Dietz *et al.*¹¹ found that the recipients were less likely to be attacked if a threat was written in the letter. An appropriate closing of the letter (such as "Sincerely") increased the likelihood that the member of Congress would be approached. Volunteering one's name and address also increased the likelihood of being approached. Regarding celebrities, the presence or absence of threats was not associated with pursuit in 107 letters reviewed and compared. The risk of pursuit was decreased when letters were written on lined paper, but when more

than 10 letters were written, volunteering name and address increased the likelihood of an approach.

A number of studies have examined factors that would increase or decrease the risk of a victim's being approached. Kienlen *et al.*¹⁰ compared a group of 8 psychotic stalkers with a group 17 nonpsychotic stalkers. All of the psychotic stalkers visited the victims' homes, while less than half of the nonpsychotic stalkers approached their victims' homes. Nonpsychotic stalkers made verbal threats more often than psychotic stalkers. Rates of violence were higher in the nonpsychotic group but differences were not statistically significant.

In addition to uncovering risks, research is now beginning to investigate variations in typical stalking, including reverse stalking, same-gender stalking,¹³ stalking on college campuses,¹⁴ stalking of clinicians,¹⁵ and cyberstalking. Research in these areas is in its infancy.

What Is Not Known?

Until the study by James *et al.*,¹⁶ little was known about stalking and serious violence. Citations throughout research indicate that homicide rates are approximately 2 percent, but other forms of violence range from 3 to 40 percent. These reports may or may not be accurate, and they have been contradicted by other experts in the field as overestimations. Violence has been reported in up to 60 percent of stalkers. However, the operational definitions of violence have been vague or too broad, sample sizes have been small, or researchers have had difficulty in identifying offenders charged with assaults who also stalk. Gathering data on stalkers who have committed serious acts of violence against their victims has been difficult from a research standpoint. Stalkers who perpetrate serious acts of violence are charged with assaults, not stalking.

A common problem encountered in the operational definition of violence lies in the legal definition of stalking. Many jurisdictions have aggravated-stalking statutes that are useful in identifying a cohort of potentially violent stalkers; however, many jurisdictions include violence against property under this statute. Two of the most cited studies that had large samples did show some association between stalking and violence. Harmon *et al.*¹⁷ studied 175 stalkers in 1998 and defined a stalker as violent if he physically assaulted the target or associate or attacked the property. Significant associations with violence

were found in stalkers who had intimate relations with their victims and in those with a diagnosed Axis II disorder and who engaged in substance abuse and issued threats to the victims. Sixty percent of the stalkers who threatened acted on their threats, whereas 20 percent of nonthreateners were violent. While adding much needed data in this area, this study does not differentiate the magnitude of violence.

Mullen *et al.*⁶ studied 145 stalkers in 1999 to establish risk factors associated with threats and assaults. They restricted the definition of assault to attack on the person. Regression analyses showed that assaults were predicted by prior criminal convictions, substance abuse, and typology. The rejected and resentful stalkers were more likely to assault their victims. While there were some serious assaults perpetrated by this group, Mullen *et al.* pointed out that most injuries were limited to bruises and abrasions.

Also in 1999, Palarea *et al.*¹⁸ of the Threat Management Unit in Los Angeles compared 135 intimate stalkers with 88 nonintimate stalkers. Intimate stalkers were more likely to threaten their victims, to commit violence against property and their victims and likely to approach their victims physically. A major shortcoming of the study is the lack of an operational definition of violence against victims.

Meloy *et al.*¹⁹ in 2001 studied 59 stalkers to determine risk factors associated with violence. Risk of violence was associated with a former intimate relationship with the victim, absence of major mental illness, and the presence of a threat.

Farnham *et al.*²⁰ in 2000 studied 50 stalkers and used stringent criteria for violence to include grievous bodily harm. The presence of psychosis was negatively associated with violence, and a prior intimate relationship with the victim was positively and significantly associated with violence.

Risk management models for assessing stalkers are in the early stages of development. None to date has included separate criteria for assessing severe violence. In his book, Mullen²¹ identifies risk factors gathered through research that have already been presented in this article: substance abuse, prior criminal history, being male, making threats, having a personality disorder, pursuing a former intimate, and being unemployed.

What the present risk factors do not elucidate is the magnitude of violence. James *et al.*¹⁶ are the first to define serious violence, to provide a ceiling on the

magnitude of violence, to use an adequate sample size, and to have access to offenders who have stalked and assaulted their victims. They also developed risk factors for serious assaults that are useful in protecting victims and performing accurate assessments. It establishes a new set of risk factors that contradict those that indicate a risk for general violence among stalkers. In their study of 85 stalkers, 27 offenders met the criteria for serious violence. Serious violence (including murder, attempted murder, grievous bodily harm, actual bodily harm) was associated with the absence of criminal convictions and the presence of employment. No associations were found with substance abuse or personality disorder.

The research by James and Farnham¹⁶ deals with a very small but extremely important subset of stalkers. It does not contradict research findings regarding general violence but instead reveals a very specific risk in a small but important cohort.

The field of stalking remains an important area for methodologically sound research. Research especially in the area of risk assessment is necessary, as forensic psychiatrists are frequently called on either to assess the stalker or to assist in management of the stalker. As is seen in this most recent work, subtypes of stalkers indeed exhibit very different behavior that necessitates systematic examination. Victims of stalking are also users of the services of forensic psychiatrists. Continued research in this field will open avenues for prevention. James and Farnham¹⁶ deserve recognition for formulating a piece of the algorithm that will assist with the assessment and management of stalkers.

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