

Stalkers: The South Carolina Experience

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Medical records of 18 pretrial detainees charged with stalking were evaluated at a forensic unit in Columbia, South Carolina from January 1992 to December 1994 and their records were compared with those of 18 offenders in the same unit randomly matched for sex, race, and whether associated crimes were violent or not. Compared variables included age, marital status, level of education, substance abuse, Axis I diagnosis, prior psychiatric hospitalizations, military history, and organicity. Significant findings show that alleged stalkers were better educated, less likely to be married or to abuse substances, and more likely to have military training and organicity when compared with other offenders. The prototypical stalker in this study is a single, educated male who is likely to have military training as well as some degree of organicity. He is less likely than other offenders to abuse substances. Replication studies are needed.

Due to the recent highly publicized cases involving celebrities and politicians, stalking has received much media attention and has been described as the crime of the nineties. Despite the sensationalism, few controlled studies have been conducted in this area. This is due in part to the recency of the legislation pertaining to stalking. The phenomenon of stalking

predates the legislation, so many studies describing erotomania or obsessional following are also relevant to stalking. Meloy and Gothard¹ compared demographic and clinical variables of 20 obsessional followers to those of 30 offenders with mental disorders. The obsessional followers were older and better educated. Zona, Sharma, and Lane² divided obsessional followers into an erotomania group, a love obsessional group, and a simple obsessional group. Women and foreign-born subjects comprised the majority of the erotomania group. Love obsessionals were psychotic individuals whose obsessions were one of many delusions or individuals who realized their love was not returned. Simple obsessionals had a prior relationship to the victim. In two studies by Dietz *et al.*, they examined letters written by obsessional followers of celebrities³ and congressmen⁴

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looking for variables that may have predicted whether the followers would attack their victims. In a recent presentation, Dietz⁵ described stalkers as being mentally ill, believing themselves to be unique, keeping diaries to record their stalking behavior, showing up at the residence or work place of the victim, and switching targets.

South Carolina enacted a stalking statute in 1992 and amended it in 1993 to make the offense a misdemeanor. This statute is modeled after the California definition of stalking. According to SC 16-3-1070 (SC Code of Laws, Ann. § 16-3-1070), stalking is the unlawful, malicious, and repeated following or harassment of another person and the making of a credible threat with the intent to place that person in reasonable fear of death or bodily injury. The first offense of stalking is punishable by a \$1,000 fine, a year in prison, or both. The second offense carries a \$2,000 fine, up to three years in prison, or both. Legislative changes for 1996 include reclassifying stalking as a felony with stricter penalties.

The following is a comparative study of alleged stalkers in South Carolina.

Methods

A retrospective record review of 18 pretrial detainees charged with stalking was conducted. The detainees had been evaluated at the William S. Hall Psychiatric Institute Forensic Services in Columbia, SC, from 1992 to 1994. To be charged with stalking, subjects must have unlawfully and maliciously followed or harassed another person and placed them in reasonable fear or bodily harm pursuant to Section 16-3-1070 of South Caro-

lina Law. These charges were supported by incident reports related to the alleged offense. The 18 stalkers were randomly matched to a sample of 18 pretrial detainees also at the Hall Institute, based on sex, race, and whether their associated crimes were violent or not. The eight variables measured were age, marital status, education, prior psychiatric inpatient admissions, substance abuse, Axis I diagnosis, military history, and organicity. Organicity was defined as prenatal or perinatal complications, head injury with a documented personality change, or abnormal magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) findings. All variables except age were compared with chi-square analyses. Age was analyzed with a one-tailed *t* test. Significance was set a $p < .01$.

Results

All stalkers in this study were male.

Table 1 displays the eight variables comparing the alleged stalkers with the offenders. The mean age difference between stalkers and offenders was not statistically significant, although stalkers were three years older on average. Seventeen of the 18 stalkers were not married. Three were divorced, 2 were separated, and 12 were single. Nine stalkers had the equivalent of or higher than a 12th-grade education compared with four subjects who had attained this level of education in the offender group. Seven in the stalker group had more than a high school education; five of the stalkers had attended some college, and two had attended vocational school. Subjects in the stalking group were less likely to abuse substances than those in the offender

Table 1
Comparison of Alleged Stalkers with Offenders

Variables	Stalking Group, N = 18 (mean age, 34.1 years; range, 18 to 54)	Control Group, N = 18 (mean age, 31.2 years; range, 19 to 47)
Married	1*	4
Education >12 years	9*	4
Prior psychiatric hospitalization	9	10
Substance abuse	11*	15
Military history	5*	2
Axis I diagnosis	8	7
Organicity	9*	2

* χ^2 , $p < .01$.

group. Among the 11 substance abusers who were stalkers, alcohol was most frequently used. Alleged stalkers were more likely to have had military training. Five of the 18 had served in the Armed Forces. Two were sergeants, one was a career marine with 17 years of service, one was active in the National Guard, and one had received a General Discharge from the Army. Half of the stalking group suffered some degree of organicity. Two had abnormal MRI scans showing nonspecific areas in the right frontal lobe consistent with neonatal insults and a cystic lesion in the brain with atrophy. Four had head trauma with documented personality changes, two had perinatal trauma, and one had both perinatal trauma and a head injury with a documented personality change.

Of the 18 alleged stalkers, seven were convicted, two had their stalking charges dismissed as part of a plea bargain arrangement that resulted in conviction for their associated charges, one was dismissed, two were *not proessed* due to findings of incompetence, three were found not guilty by reason of insanity, and one

was expunged; no disposition was reported for two.

Discussion

Many of the findings in this study confirm the findings of existing research. Consistent with the findings of Meloy and Gothard,¹ the subjects in the stalking group in this study were better educated than the control group. Although IQ tests were not available for all of the alleged stalkers and the matched sample, the group of stalkers was not diagnosed with intellectual impairments as often as the control group. Only one individual in the stalking group was diagnosed with mental retardation; his charges were *not proessed* due to his not being competent to stand trial. One was also diagnosed with borderline intellectual functioning, compared with the control group in which three were diagnosed with mental retardation and two with borderline intellectual functioning.

Although the mean age difference between groups was not statistically significant, alleged stalkers were 3 years older than the offenders with an average age of

34 years, which is consistent with other research findings.

Although there were no differences in the number of psychiatric hospitalizations between the groups, 78 percent of the stalking group was mentally ill with an Axis I diagnosis. Nine had illnesses with psychotic features; two with schizophrenia, two with delusional disorders, and five with mood disorders with psychotic features. One also had organic mental disorder. In the control group, two had schizophreniform disorder, one had psychosis-not otherwise specified (NOS), two had psychotic mood disorders, and one had organic mental disorder. Statistical analyses were not performed on the specific diagnoses; however, the data indicate a higher prevalence of mood disorders with psychotic features and delusional disorders among the stalking group. The Meloy and Gothard¹ and the Zona *et al.*² groups had comparable amounts of mental illness. Axis II diagnoses were not analyzed in this study because some examiners at the Hall Institute do not code Axis II diagnoses for court evaluations due to possible prejudicial value. Only one alleged stalker was diagnosed with a personality disorder.

Also consistent with the findings of Meloy and Gothard¹ and Zona *et al.*² were the amounts of substance abuse. Seventy percent of the obsessional followers in Meloy's group abused substances, 43 percent in Zona's group, and 61 percent in this study's stalking group.

To date, no published study on stalking has addressed military history or organicity. Alleged stalkers were two and one-half times more likely to have served in

the Armed Forces compared with those in the control group. In addition to the five who had military training, two in the stalking group had fathers who were career military. Compared with the five in the stalking group, only two in the control group had military training.

Fifty percent of the alleged stalkers had some degree of organicity. In addition to the nine who met the defined criteria for organicity, two had subtle signs. One's mother died while giving birth to him, and another had a mother who was involved in a motor vehicle accident while pregnant with him and who also had an interuterine device in place at the time of his conception. Organicity in the control group consisted of one offender with posttraumatic seizures and another with hypertensive encephalopathy.

Although no statistical analyses were performed on the victims of the alleged stalkers, the demographic details deserve attention. All victims were female. Nine of the alleged stalkers had prior romantic involvement with their victims. Others were acquaintances. Acquaintance victims included a college teacher, a bank teller, three neighbors, and a woman who was involved in an automobile accident with the alleged stalker. Seven of the victims were harmed. One sustained a fractured collar bone, one was dragged across a parking lot, one was raped, one was shot, one had gasoline poured on her and was shot at, and one was hit. The disposition of the charges of the alleged stalkers varied. Of the 18, only 7 were convicted on their charges of stalking. Two others were convicted, but the stalking charge was dismissed as part of a plea

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bargain, giving an overall conviction rate of 50 percent. The three stalkers who were acquitted by reasons of insanity were diagnosed with schizophrenia and transferred to the state hospital. This accounts for only 17 percent of the sample, which is not surprising given South Carolina's modified McNaghten standard for criminal responsibility. Realizing that this is a preliminary study with a small sample, the findings describe the prototypical stalker as an older, unmarried male with a better than average education, likely to have military training and organicity. He is less likely to abuse substances as compared with other offenders. Perhaps because of their older age and better education, stalkers have the ability to follow their victims and defer gratification. Their organicity may account for their final loss

of control and possible acts of violence. Replication studies are needed.

References

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