

Violent Versus Nonviolent Stalkers

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Medical records of 42 pretrial detainees charged with stalking in South Carolina from January 1992 to January 1996 were reviewed. The group was divided into 22 nonviolent and 20 violent stalkers. Stalkers were classified as violent if they had associated charges involving bodily harm to their victims or if they met the criteria for South Carolina's legal definition of aggravated stalking. Variables compared included age, sex, marital status, level of education, substance abuse, Axis I diagnosis, military history, organicity, and whether the victim was a casual associate or had a previous attachment to the stalker. There were no statistically significant differences between the groups. Approaching statistical significance was the finding that violent stalkers were more likely to have had a previous attachment to their victims, and nonviolent stalkers were more likely to be casually associated with their victims.

Stalking has been referred to as the crime of the nineties. Now that antistalking legislation has been enacted throughout the United States, some states are modifying existing legislation. For instance, in South Carolina the definition of stalking has been broadened, and it has been reclassified as a felony with more severe penalties. Legislation is also focusing on the violence that sometimes accompanies stalking. South Carolina has an Aggravated Stalking charge, which is defined as stalking accompanied or followed by an act of violence.

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Before there was antistalking legislation, stalkers were classified in research as obsessional followers. Meloy and Gothard¹ describe obsessional followers as older, better educated males compared with a group of offenders. Harmon *et al.*,² in their study of 48 persons charged with harassing and menacing behavior, found stalkers to be older, Caucasian, better educated, and having high rates of psychosis. They also examined the nature of attachment and relationship of the stalker to the victim.

Although data exist for obsessional followers, few studies limit their samples to individuals charged with stalking. Schwartz-Watts *et al.*³ compared 18 stalkers with offenders matched for sex, race, age, and whether the associated crime was violent or not. Stalkers were more likely to be older, better educated,

single males with a military history and organicity. They were less likely to abuse substances.

Despite the growing literature on stalkers and the legislation targeting stalking with associated violent acts, no studies exist that compare violent with nonviolent stalkers. Harmon *et al.*² found that 21 percent of the obsessional followers in their clinic were assaultive. Meloy,⁴ in his analysis of data from 10 existing studies, cites rates of violence from 3 to 30 percent. There is no standard definition of a violent stalker.

Dietz *et al.*, in two studies^{5, 6} looking at threatening letters written to Hollywood celebrities and Congressmen, searched for variables that might predict whether the letter recipients would likely be approached or not. He found that people who threatened violence toward Congressmen were less likely to approach them.

Method

This study will compare violent with nonviolent stalkers in an attempt to define what constitutes violent stalking and to begin to establish variables associated with violent stalking.

In South Carolina, the stalking statute was amended in 1995 to make some forms of stalking a felony with more severe sentences punishable under some circumstances with up to 15 years in prison (Table 1). As of 1995, stalkers who commit an act of violence accompanying or following the charge of stalking can be charged with Aggravated Stalking.

Retrospective record reviews were conducted on 42 subjects charged with

Table 1
South Carolina Stalking Statute
(SC-16-3-1700 (amended 1995))

Stalking is a pattern of words or conduct that is intended to and does cause a targeted person and would create a reasonable person in the targeted person's position to fear:

1. Death of a person or a member of his family
 2. Assault upon a person or a member of his family
 3. Bodily injury to a person or a member of his family
 4. Criminal sexual contact on the person or member of his family
 5. Kidnaping of a person or a member of his family
 6. Damage to the property of a person or a member of his family
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stalking in South Carolina. The subjects were ordered by the court to undergo competency to stand trial/criminal responsibility evaluations or were admitted on an emergency basis to a forensic hospital from one of the 56 detention centers in South Carolina. Incident reports, arrest warrants, and victim statements were used to classify behaviors as violent or not, since South Carolina's use of the word "fear" in its statute is not easily measurable. Subjects classified as violent stalkers had associated charges involving bodily harm to their victim or were charged with or would have met the criteria for South Carolina's legal definition of Aggravated Stalking. Nonviolent stalkers either had no associated charges or associated charges not meeting the criteria for Aggravated Stalking. There were 20 stalkers in the violent group and 22 in the nonviolent group. The violent and nonviolent stalkers were compared using

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Table 2
Comparisons Between Violent and Nonviolent Stalkers

	Results	
	Nonviolent stalkers <i>n</i> = 22	Violent stalkers <i>n</i> = 20
Age, years	34.0	35.1
Caucasian	16	13
African American	6	7
Male	20	20
Female	2	0
Married	0	1
Education > 12	14	12
Psychotic	8	7
Substance abuse	12	13
Military	6	4
Organicity	8	9
Casual associate	10	4
Prior attachment	12	16

the following variables: age, race, sex, marital status, education level, Axis I diagnosis, substance abuse, military history, organicity as defined by head injury with a documented personality change, abnormal magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) results or documented neonatal insults, and relationship to the victim. The relationships with victims were categorized as having a prior attachment or being casually associated.

Results

Table 2 displays variables comparing violent with nonviolent stalkers. There were no significant differences between the ages of the groups. The average age of a violent stalker was 35.1 years, while the average age of a nonviolent stalker was 34.0 years. The range of ages in the violent group was 16 to 52 years. The range

of ages in the nonviolent group was 18 to 55 years.

Both groups were more likely to be Caucasian, differing from the general population of South Carolina prisons and our court clinic, which serves an approximately 55 percent African-American population. There were 13 Caucasians in the violent group and 16 in the nonviolent group.

Only two females were charged with stalking from 1992 through 1996 compared with 40 males. Both of the females were nonviolent and diagnosed as psychotic. They were casual associates of their victims. Only one of the 42 stalkers was married. Both groups tended to be well educated. Twelve of the 20 violent stalkers had either a general education degree (GED) or education beyond high school. Fourteen of the 22 stalkers had a GED or education beyond high school.

Approximately one-third of each group had diagnosed psychoses. Of the 15 psychotic stalkers, only 4 were found not guilty by reason of insanity and were committed to treatment at a state facility. South Carolina's definition of insanity is a modified McNaghten standard, which accounts most likely for the low rate of acquittals on the basis of insanity.

Both groups had high rates of substance abuse. Thirteen of the violent and 12 of the nonviolent stalkers had a history of substance abuse. The most common substance used was alcohol.

Military history was not different between groups in that six of the nonviolent and five of the violent stalkers had served in the military. One other stalker worked at an Air Force base. Two of the stalkers

had embarked upon law enforcement careers. One female had applied to the police force, and one male was a graduate of the criminal justice academy.

Overall, both groups had high rates of organicity, but the rates did not differ from each other. Nine of the 20 stalkers in the violent group had some organicity compared with 8 of 22 in the nonviolent group. Types of organicity included cystic lesions in the brain, neonatal arrest, closed head injuries from an elevator shaft fall and a kick to the head by a bull, and delirium secondary to renal failure. One subject had severe mental retardation.

The relationship of the victim to the stalker approached statistical significance. Victims who had a prior relationship to the stalker were likely to be assaulted. Casual associates were less likely to be assaulted. Of particular interest is the number of ex-wives who were assaulted by violent stalkers. Sixteen of the victims of violent stalkers had an amorous attachment to the stalker. Eleven of the 16 victims were former wives. On a similar note, of the 12 victims of nonviolent stalking who had a previous attachment to the stalker, 9 were ex-girlfriends. Only 3 were former spouses.

Discussion

The general findings of this study support existing data showing stalkers to be older, educated, unmarried Caucasian males with high rates of substance abuse and psychosis. Our findings differed from existing studies on the rate of associated violence. Meloy⁴ quotes rates from 3 to 30 percent and Harmon *et al.*² a rate of 21

percent. In our sample, 40 percent of the stalkers were violent. This disparity may be due to the nature of the referral to the court clinics; in South Carolina, only felony-charged detainees are referred for evaluation. The disparity may also arise from the definition of accompanying violence, which underscores the need for further research in this area.

This study did not show any significant differences in organicity, military history, or rates of substance abuse between groups.

This study demonstrates that when comparing demographic and clinical variables, there is no difference between violent and nonviolent stalkers. What approaches significance is the relationship of the stalker to his victim. Prior attachment to the victim is an important variable to consider. Ex-wives are the group of victims most likely to be targeted by violent stalkers. Many of the victims were former spouses. Some of the accompanying violence included shooting, raping, fracturing a collar bone, swinging an axe, running down in an automobile, and hitting.

Nonviolent stalkers may be more likely than violent stalkers to be acquainted with their victims. Some of the victims of nonviolent stalking included a media personality, three bank tellers, a delicatessen owner, neighbors, a college teacher, an employer, and a woman involved in an automobile accident with the stalker. When the victim of nonviolent stalking had a prior relationship with the victim, she was more likely to be an ex-girlfriend than an ex-wife, perhaps indicating that the nature of the attachment was less strong.

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The types of attachment to victims are consistent with the classifications of Harmon *et al.*,² which include such areas as employment, acquaintance, and media recognition. The nature of the attachment of the stalker to the victim was not analyzed.

Due to the alarmingly high rates of associated violence that were found in this study, replication studies are needed, as well as a further exploration of factors associated with violence in persons charged with stalking.

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