

Risk Factors for Stalking Persistence and Violence among Intimate Partner Stalkers

Dr. Brent A. Paterline¹

Abstract

Assessing the risk associated with stalking behavior is an important topic for social workers, victim advocates, criminal justice personnel, and others who work with victims of interpersonal crime. Most risk-related research in regard to stalking has focused on the risk factors of stalking, such as type of person who is most likely to be a stalker. There has been very little research exploring the risk factors that are correlated with stalking duration and stalking violence. This study adds to the literature on stalking risk assessment by examining the factors associated with stalking duration and stalking violence. The study shows that the most important predictors of persistent stalking include: (1) a victim's income, (2) whether or not the victim had children with the stalker, and (3) whether or not the stalker wished to reconcile his relationship with the victim. The most significant correlates of whether or not a stalker committed violence while stalking include: (1) whether or not a stalker had been arrested for stalking crimes, (2) whether or not the stalker physically abused the victim in their prior relationship, and (3) whether or not the stalker had made threats against the victim.

Intimate Partner Stalking

An important part of any study must be to clarify what is being studied (i.e., what behaviors constitute stalking). There are a variety of definitions of stalking, but most of these definitions share several key elements, including the occurrence of repeated, intrusive, and harassing behavior that is unwanted as that is perceived by the victim as intrusive and/or threatening and evokes fear and distress (Meloy, 2007; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Tjaden, 2009). Unlike other crime, stalking does not occur on a single occasion and victims may experience different stalking behaviors, such as trespassing, unwanted phone calls, or following. As such, stalking is a crime of intimidation and psychological fear that can cause devastating fear and emotional distress among victims, as well as disruption to the social and work life. (Bjerregaard, 2000; Davis, Coker, & Sanderson, 2002; Fisher Cullen, & Turner, 2000, 2002; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998b). Victims of stalking also may have to significantly alter their lives and be disrupted from performing everyday tasks, such as answering the phone and reading mail, out of fear.

In the United States alone, it is estimated that over three million people will have experienced stalking each year (Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009). One of the common stereotypes of stalking is that it is a violent crime that is stranger-perpetrated or committed in pursuit of a celebrity (Davis & Frieze, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Research shows that victims are more likely stalked by a known perpetrator, in most cases a current or former intimate partner, rather than a stranger (Black et al., 2011; Catalano, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). In most cases the stalker and the victim of his or her stalking shared some degree of acquaintance (Baum et al., 2009; Bjerregaard, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007) and a recent meta-analysis of stalking studies estimated that approximately 80 percent of stalkers were known to the victim and 50 percent of stalking emerges from a romantic relationship (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

Research on intimate partner stalking is uncommon and studies which have examined the violence among intimate partner stalkers have just begun (Logan & Walker, 2009, Melton, 2007). We do know that there are several ways in which intimate partner stalking is different from non-intimate stalking. First, due to a relationship history between the stalker and the victim, intimate partner stalkers tend to have a wider range of stalking behaviors as they have more personal knowledge of their victims (Logan et al., 2006; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). Second, intimate partner stalkers typically continue to stalk their victim longer than stranger stalkers and their stalking often begins during the relationship and continues after the relationship ends (Logan et al. 2006; Melton,

¹ Professor, Internship Coordinator, Department of Criminal Justice, University of North Georgia, USA, 770-401-5146

2007). Third, although all forms of stalking can be stressful, intimate partner stalking may be a source of greater psychological distress for the victims because of continued shared connections (Logan & Cole, 2007; Logan et al., 2006). These shared connections may include children, pets, or shared property. Finally, intimate partner stalkers are also more likely than stranger stalkers to threaten their victims and engage in violence and physical abuse. It may be that stalking is a variant of intimate partner violence and is often considered an extension of the power and control used dominated a victim (Logan & Walker, 2009; Melton, 2007a).

Overall, research suggests that stalking is a significant risk factor for other forms of violence, including lethal violence, in victims' relationships. (Coleman, 1997; McFarlane et al., 1999, 2002; Mechanic et al., 2000). There are few studies, however, that examine the predictors of stalking persistence and stalking's associations with other forms of violence. This research addresses this issue by examining the possible predictors of stalking of stalking violence. Previous researchers have found some of the most important predictors of stalking violence include mental disorders (McEwan & Strand, 2013; Rosenfeld, 2003; Eke et al., 2011), a prior history of abusive behavior (Burgess et al., 1997; Davis et al., 2000; Logan et al., 2000; Melton, 2007), making threats of violence (Roberts, 2005), substance abuse (McEwan et al., 2007), and trespassing (Groenen & Vervaeke, 2009).

Research Methodology

Data for this study was obtained from National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD) archives at <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/NACJD/index.html>. Established in 1978, the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD) archives and disseminates data on crime and justice for secondary analysis. The archive contains data from over 2,700 curated studies or statistical data series. NACJD is home to several large-scale and well known datasets, including the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), and the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

This paper utilizes data from a study funded by the United States Department of Justice which examined the nature of the stalking experiences of non-celebrity stalking victims who had previously been in intimate relationships with their stalkers. These were cases in which the stalkers were seeking revenge and/or reconciliation through stalking. Data were collected from 187 female stalking victims who were victims of former intimate stalking within the previous five years. Participants all resided in the eastern United States and were recruited through victim service agencies and law enforcement agencies. To be included in this study, participants had to meet two requirements. First, they must have been repeatedly harassed, followed, and/or threatened during the past five years by someone with whom they had had an intimate relationship (i.e. through marriage, cohabiting, or dating). Second, the women must have either experienced emotional distress, fear of bodily harm, actual bodily harm, or the belief that the stalker intended to cause one or more of the above. All of the participants in this study were administered a survey and a semi-structured face-to-face interview.

Dependent Variables

Two variables were used as dependent variables in this study: (1) stalking duration and (2) the frequency of stalker-on-victim violence. Stalking duration is the number of months victims reported being stalked by a former intimate. The length victims in this study were stalked ranged from 1 month to 456 months, with a median of 12 months. Table 1 below depicts the most common stalking behaviors that happened to women in this sample. Telephone calls (90.4%) were the most typically form of stalking behavior experienced and over 78 percent of the women in this sample believed that they had been watched by their stalker.

Table 1: Stalking Behavior Percentage of Women Reporting Behavior

Phone calls	90.4%
Letters	59.4%
Following	68.4%
Driving/Walking by house	54.0%
Watching	78.6%
Sabotaging employment	33.7%
Trespassing	53.5%
Breaking into house	35.8%
Property damage	43.9%
Stealing Victim's Property	24/6%

The second dependent variable in this study, stalker-on-victim violence, was defined as the number of times a stalker pushed, shoved, kicked, stomped, slapped, sexually assaulted, punch, threw, choked, grabbed, or threw an object at a victim. Forty-six percent of the victims in this study reported that their stalkers had committed violence against them during the stalking. (Table 2). The most common types of physical abuse suffered at the hands of their former intimates were pushing, slapping, and punching.

Table 2: Types of Violence during Prior Relationship with Stalker

Types of Violence	Percentage of Women Reporting Each Type Violence
Punching/Slapping	37%
Pushing/Shoving	26%
Choking	10%
Rape/Sexual Assault	9%
Victim Being Throw	8%
Kicking/Stomping	7%
Objects thrown at Victim	6%
Grabbing	6%
Use of a Weapon	5%

Independent Variables

This study utilized fourteen independent variables as predictors of the two dependent variables (1) stalking duration and (2) violence during stalking. The independent variables included variables describing the characteristics of the stalking victim, characteristics of stalker, and characteristics of the stalker-victim relationship.

The mean age for female stalking victims in this study was 34 with an age range from 18 to 74. Seventy 74 percent of this sample were white and 24 percent were African America. Other racial groups are not represented in this sample. Ninety percent of the women had completed at least high school, and 69% had completed at least some college. The victims' annual household incomes ranged from nothing through \$130,000, with a median income of \$39,128.

The second set of independent variables focused on the characteristics of the stalkers. The age of stalkers ranged from 17 to 57, with and median age of 30, and a standard deviation of 8.9. Fifty seven percent of the stalkers were white, 37 percent were African American, and 6.5 percent represented other racial minorities. The educational attainment of the stalkers ranged from some elementary school through completion of a doctoral program. Seventy-seven percent of the stalkers had completed high school and 45% had completed at least some college. Sixty-nine percent of the stalkers were employed; 62% in blue-collar positions and 37% holding white-collar positions. According to the interview respondents, 61.7% of the stalkers had some type of prior criminal record. Of those who were able to specify the type of prior record, 31% indicated a prior record for violent offenses. According to the victims, 72% of the stalkers abused either drugs or alcohol. Twenty-eight of the stalkers 38% of the stalkers were arrested at some point during the stalking period.

The third set of independent variables focused on other variables relating the characteristics of the victim's relationship with the stalker. The prior relationship between victim and stalker varied: 37% were married, 25% were living together but not married, 24% were seriously dating or engaged, and 15% were dating only casually. Seventy-five percent reported that the stalker began his controlling behavior during their prior relationship. The majority (57.2%) of the victims had not had children with their stalkers, although 20.9% had one child with their stalkers, and 21.9% shared two or more children with their stalkers. Of those who had children with their stalkers, most stated that the stalker had at least some contact with the children, thus increasing the contact between stalker and victim. Seventy-three percent of the women reported threats of violence made by the stalkers against them and sixty-four percent of the victims reported that they were a victim of domestic violence during their prior relationship with the stalker. Victims were asked to identify their former intimates' motives for stalking them. The most frequently perceived reasons for the stalking were: reconciliation (74.9%); revenge: (44.9%); possession/control (26.9%); jealousy (14.4%); and intimidation (6.6%).

Results

In order to fully examine the influence of the independent variables on stalking duration and violence during stalking, a multivariate regression analysis was performed for both dependent variables. For the regression analysis, the full range of scores on the dependent variables were used, dichotomized variables were treated as

dummy variables, and ordinal measures were treated as interval. Only standardized regression coefficients were used in order to assess the relative importance of each independent variable. To prevent multi-collinearity, independent variables that were high correlated (e.g. age of victim and offender) were not included in the regression analysis.

The first regression analysis, with stalking duration as the dependent variables, is shown in Table 3. Fourteen independent variables were used as predictors of stalking duration. The total amount of variance explained by this regression model is 53 percent ($r^2 = .533$).

The strongest and most significant predictors of stalking duration were a victim's income, whether or not the victim had children with the stalker, and whether or not the stalker wished to reconcile his relationship with the victim. The greater a victim's income the longer the victim was stalked ($\beta = .60$) and those women who had children with the stalker were stalked longer than those victims who did not have children with their stalker ($\beta = .32$). Stalker's whose primary motivation for stalking was reconciliation stalked longer than those whose primary motivation was revenge ($\beta = .37$). Non-white victims were stalked longer than white victims ($\beta = .28$) and victims were who suffered domestic abuse during their prior relationship with the stalker were had shorter durations of stalking ($\beta = .26$) than those women who were not abused during prior relationship with the stalker. All of these relationship were significant at the .05 level. Several independent variables were not significant predictors of stalking duration, these include the victim's education level, whether or not the stalker had a prior conviction, the stalkers use of alcohol and drugs, the stalker's educational level, and the number of threats the stalker made toward the victim. Interesting, whether or not a stalker had been arrested for stalking was not a significant predictor of stalking durations. Those stalkers who had been arrested where not more likely to stop stalking ($\beta = .18$). However, this was not significant at the .05 level.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis (Dependent Variable = Stalking Duration)

Independent Variables	Beta
Victim's Race	.28*
Victim's Income	.60*
Victim's Education	-.03
Victim had Children with Stalker	.32*
Domestic Abuse in Previously Relationship with Stalker	.26*
Stalker's Race	.12
Stalker's Education Level	-.16
Stalker had been Arrested for Stalking	.18
Stalker has Prior Convictions	.08
Stalker used Alcohol	.09
Stalker used Drugs	.04
Number of Threats Stalker made towards Victim	.02
Stalker's Motivation was Reconciliation	.37*
Stalker's Motivation was Revenge	.15

 *Relationship significant at the .05 level

The second regression analysis shown in Table 4 utilizes stalking violence has a dependent variable. Stalker-on-victim violence, was defined as the number of times a stalker pushed, shoved, kicked, stomped, slapped, sexually assaulted, punch, threw, choked, grabbed, or threw an object at a victim. Fourteen independent variables were used as predictors of stalking violence. The total amount of variance explained by this regression module is 56 percent ($r^2 = .56$).

Several of the most significant predictors of stalking violence were whether or not a stalker had been arrested for stalking crimes, whether or not the stalker physically abused the victim in their prior relationship, and whether or not the stalker had made threats against the victim. Those stalkers who were arrested had less incidents of violence that stalkers who had never been arrested for stalking ($\beta = -.33$). Those stalkers who physically abused the victim in their prior relationship had great incidences violence than those who had not ($\beta = .35$). Stalkers who had made threats against the victim hand more incidences of violence than those stalkers who had not threatened victim ($\beta = .31$). Stalkers who the victim believed stalked for revenge had more incidences of violence ($\beta = .26$) were more likely to commit violence than those stalkers who were stalked for reconciliation ($\beta = .08$). Stalkers who used drugs were more likely to commit violence that those stalkers who did not use drugs ($\beta = .27$). All of these relationships were significant at the .05 level.

Table 4 Multiple Regression Analysis (Dependent Variable = Violence During Stalking)

Independent Variables	Beta
Victim's Race	.13
Victim's Income	.05
Victim's Education	-.06
Victim had Children with Stalker	.18
Domestic Abuse in Previously Relationship with Stalker	.35*
Stalker's Race	.18
Stalker's Education Level	-.08
Stalker had been Arrested for Stalking	-.33*
Stalker has Prior Convictions	.04
Stalker used Alcohol	.09
Stalker used Drugs	.27*
Number of Threats Stalker made towards Victim	.31*
Stalker's Motivation was Reconciliation	.07
Stalker's Motivation was Revenge	.26*

*Relationship significant at the .05 level

There are several variables that were not significant predictors of stalking violence. Those variables included victim race, victim educational level, victim income, whether or not the victim had children with the stalker, stalker race, stalker income level, stalker educational level, stalker use of alcohol, and whether or not the stalker has been previously convicted of a crime.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is a significant body of research suggesting that stalking is widespread, that it happens disproportionately at the hands of current or former intimate partners. The findings of this study coincide with previous research, which concludes that stalking of intimate partners is a chronic problem that can possibly last years. The study revealed that various variables interact to predict stalking durations. For instance, a young women non-white who makes an above average income and has children with a stalker may be more vulnerable to long-term stalking than women who is white and maintains a lower level of income and has no children with the stalker. Stalkers who wish to reconcile with their victim are more likely to stalk for a longer time than stalkers who motivated by revenge. Given this understanding, there is a need to future research to collect longitudinal data with larger data sets that allow for more exploration of individual-risk factors of stalking. Risk factors for stalking can provided important implications for social worker practice by allowing social workers to identify both high-risk victims and perpetrators as to provide services, such as legal, treatment, and education. Social workers need to forge collaborative efforts with victim services to help practitioners gain a better understanding of the nature and early signs of stalking so that preventive measures can be taken early.

Very few studies have examined the predictors of violence among stalking victims and their stalkers. Forty-six percent of the victims in this study reported that their stalkers had committed violence against them during the stalking. The prevalence rates of violence seen in the data set correspond with the range reported in other studies which found that violence among stalker victims usually range between 36 percent and 48 percent (Rosenfeld, 2004). In line with previous research, the risk of violence to the victim does appear heightened by the presence of threats made by the stalker and a history of violence in the victim's previous relationship with the stalker. Given that stalking is strongly related to previous intimate partner violence, social workers and victim assistance programs need to incorporate programs related to stalking when they provide services to victims of intimate partner violence. More specifically, information and resources need to be provided to victims so that they can better understand that intimate partner violence can escalate into stalking and take precautionary measures (such as safety planning), if needed.

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