

A REVIEW OF ADOLESCENT STALKING

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Abstract

Stalking is a pattern of fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated behaviour usually from one individual to another. Research indicates that stalking is a gendered crime with the largest rate of perpetration being between ex-partners of adult age, however stalking does exist out with this scope. This article sets out to explore whether stalking is prevalent within younger age demographics, the explanations for this prevalence, the impacts of stalking on victims and the suggested interventions that could be implemented to reduce stalking victimisation and perpetration within this group. As stalking research is limited in this field, the articles investigated are predominantly from the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia with a focus on those aged between 15-25 years old.

Key Words: Stalking, Young People, Prevalence of Stalking, Impacts of Stalking, Stalking Victimisation.

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Introduction

There is no universal definition of stalking, which can cause misperception when it comes to understanding what stalking is. (Mellins, Flowers & Wheatly, 2023). Consequently, this means there is not one universal legislation for stalking. Stalking is described as a victim-defined crime, meaning that the crime only occurs if the victims self-certified emotional status is one that meets the requirements of the stalking legislation. This alone has great complexities as an individual may have lower levels of fear and alarm due to being exposed to traumatic and violent environments then their threshold for feeling fear will be lower than the average person (Heleniak, et al, 2021). This creates subjectivity as it is difficult to uniformly categorise emotions especially in the context of criminality. Furthermore, young people's levels of fear are reduced due to their frontal cortex development.

Stalking is not a criminal offence world-wide and if there is a stalking legislation, it varies from country to country and in the U.S. from state to state. Stalking is a criminal offence in Scotland under Section 39 of the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010². It is an offence in England and Wales under the Harassment Protection Act 1997³ and more recently it became a criminal offence in Northern Ireland under the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022⁴. Despite each of these countries having different legislation, they all require similar requirements to be present for the crime of stalking to have been committed. This includes the requirement of the accused to have known or ought to have known that their actions were causing another to feel fear and/or alarm on at least two or more occasions. Various countries throughout the globe have created stalking legislation such as the U.S. and Australia who are pioneers when referring to stalking laws.

² *Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010*. Available at:

[https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2010/13/section/39#:~:text=39Offence%20of%20stalking&text=\(1\)A%20person%20\(%E2%80%9C,person%20\(%E2%80%9CB%E2%80%9D\).](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2010/13/section/39#:~:text=39Offence%20of%20stalking&text=(1)A%20person%20(%E2%80%9C,person%20(%E2%80%9CB%E2%80%9D).)

³ *Circular: a change to the Protection from Harassment Act 1997*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-change-to-the-protection-from-harassment-act-1997-introduction-of-two-new-specific-offences-of-stalking>

⁴ *Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022*. Available at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/17/enacted>

The initial stalking legislation was created in California in 1990 due to the homicide of Rebecca Schaeffer, an actress who was killed by her stalker. Her stalker used various techniques to track her including hiring a private investigator to obtain her address from the Department of Motor Vehicles. He subsequently used this information to visit her residence and shoot her (Saunders, 1998). Her homicide assisted in the passing of the California Penal Code 646.9⁵. Now, it is a federal law in all 50 states to commit the crime of stalking, yet the elements defining the act of stalking differ across states (Catalano, 2012).

Stalking legislation was introduced in Australia in Victoria in 1994 to fill a gap in legislation where someone had been targeted but had not been physically assaulted. Stalking is now a crime in all Australian states and territories (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2021). This includes the Australian Capital Territory Act 1900 s34A, New South Wales Crime Act 1900 s562AB and Northern Territory Criminal Code Act 1997 s189 to name a few⁶.

The aims of this article are to understand the prevalence of stalking within the younger demographic. This will be achieved by firstly exploring the frequency of stalking in young people before exploring the justifications for this behaviour within this cohort and finally investigating the impacts of stalking victimisation on young people. Finally, it will review interventions in place to combat stalking victimisation and perpetration in young people before highlighting the limitations of the research.

Stalking Victimisation in Young People

Much of the current stalking research focuses on adult stalking (Mullen et al, 1999; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen, 2002; Basile et al, 2006). There is little empirical research (12 in the past 20 years) focused on adolescent stalking. However, there are a limited number of studies that do explore this topic (Spitzberg, Nicasto & Cousins, 1998; Logan, Leukeild & Walker, 2002; Ravensberg & Miller, 2003; Mellins, et al, 2023). The studies cited are predominantly focused on those aged between 15-25 years old (oftentimes referenced as young adults and

⁵ *California Legislative Information*. Available at:

https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=646.9&lawCode=PEN

⁶ *Australian Privacy Foundation*. Available at: [https://privacy.org.au/resources/privacy-law/australia/#:~:text=\(1\)%20A%20person%20who%20stalks,50%20penalty%20units%2C%20or%20both.](https://privacy.org.au/resources/privacy-law/australia/#:~:text=(1)%20A%20person%20who%20stalks,50%20penalty%20units%2C%20or%20both.)

adolescents). Exploring past research from across different countries facilitates the understanding of this and assists in discovering interventions to prevent stalking victimisation amongst adolescents.

The complexities of studying young people are that different countries and facets within these define this cohort in different ways and with different age categories. Worthington (2023) suggests that this is due to cultural variations regarding social construct (stages between childhood and adulthood) and biological construct (puberty). Some organisations believe adolescence ends at the age of 26 (due to brain plasticity process ending in individuals late 20's) but the common factor is the recognition that it is a transition with no time frame of beginning and end (ibid). For the purposes of this article, we will be using the United Nations definition that, "The United Nations for statistical purposes, define those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth..." (United Nations, n.d)

Research suggests that stalking amongst the younger demographic is prevalent when compared to the general population (Spitzberg et al, 1998; Ravensberg & Miller, 2003; Purcell et al, 2009; Evans & Maloy, 2011; Lewis & Wheatley, 2023). Spitzberg et al (1998) U.S study found that 27% of students labelled themselves as victims of stalking. These findings are also reflected in Logan et al (2002) U.S study that 27% of their sample reported to having experienced stalking behaviours at one stage in their lives. A study by Björklund et al in 2010 found that 22.3% of students in Finland reported to being stalked once in their life and 26.2% reported to being stalked 2 or more times in their life. Similar findings can also be seen in governmental publications such as the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2018/19, found that those aged between 16-24 are most likely to experience stalking and harassment (this group represent 19% of all those experiencing stalking).

Bullying is a term often highlighted within the exploration of stalking behaviours and young people as researchers debate whether young people can exhibit these escalated forms of behaviour. However, Evans and Meloy (2011), work suggests that stalking is a mechanism used to continue to bully beyond the educational environment and that stalkers use this tactic to demean their victims and recruit others to assist with their goal. Furthermore, Purcell et al (2009) reiterate this as they found that 28% of participants disclosed that their motivation for the stalking was as an extension of bullying.

The Justifications for this Prevalence

It raises the question, why is stalking prevalent amongst this age group? It is important to understand the reasons for this prevalence so that effective interventions can be established.

Ravensberg and Miller (2003) work suggests that this is due to young people, especially those college age, culminating together via classes, student accommodation, social activities and so forth so could inadvertently cause rise for these unhealthy behaviours. This brings in the argument of 'legitimacy' as students are within the same networks, so it is difficult to justify whether an individual's behaviours are fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated or whether they are a constant due to commonalities in social activities, curriculums and so forth (Worthington, 2023).

It is also suggested that due to young people's lack of experience with adult social skills then navigating and managing relationships is difficult and they may act inappropriately when trying to engage in a relationship. These types of stalkers are not deemed threatening, but they do use typical stalking techniques such as sending gifts, following, phone calls etc to the target they admire. The motivation is 'romantic' and may be seen as normative by this age group due to their inexperience (Ravensberg and Miller, 2003). It was found by Gallagher, et al (1999) that a formal warning was sufficient in halting these stalkers, however it is not shown whether they then go on to stalk another target they admire. Thus, it is difficult to determine if formal warnings by law enforcement or others in power are deemed as effective interventions in crimes of stalking.

Purcell, et al (2009) found that similar justifications were found with 'rejected' stalkers. They found that the reasoning for young people showcasing these stalking behaviours (intrusive approaches, telephone calls, malicious rumours, and damaging property) was a way for them to express their feelings of rejection. Their lack of emotional and cognitive maturity prevents them from considering alternative behaviours. Rejected stalkers showcase 'insecure attachment styles' which are driven from anger for their rejector and their self-worth (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

There are challenges when investigating young people's intent as due to their age, when compared with adults, their capacity to empathise with others must be considered. Biological changes impact on the way young people think and therefore act as they are experiencing hormonal changes (Worthington, 2023). This instigates a reduction in their ability to think consequentially, therefore their decision-making ability declines along with their ability to emotionally regulate. However, their risk taking increases, as does their capacity for social interactions and a want for independence (ibid). With all of these occurring at once, it is difficult to compare this cohort to adults as their brain plasticity is being influenced by their social interactions and environments unlike adults. As young people develop so does their ability to feel fear. This means that young people lack the ability to feel fear but also the ability to see it in others. Meaning, that within this cohort, the indicator of fear is insufficient and consequently could affect whether the crime of stalking has occurred (Smith-Darden, et al, 2016). Young people are more likely to feeling of invincibility causes them to engage in riskier settings and prevents them from recognising when they have been a victim of crime (Nobels and Fox, 2013).

As stated, this invincibility reduces young people to feel fear, which is paramount for the crime of stalking to have occurred. McEwan et al (2020) found that 5.7% of young people reported to feeling fearful when stalking intrusions took place, compared to 30% in adults. The absence of fear in young people being stalked reduces their want to report or recognise their victimisation. It also disables the legislation to protect them as fear is a crucial element.

The language young people use to describe stalking behaviours and victimisation is different from adult counterparts whereby what they categorise as stalking may not be i.e. 'Facebook stalking'. Subsequently, it also means that when they are victims of a stalking behaviour, they do not label it as such. Spitzberg (2016) found that 18% of adolescents were not fearful (as they did not feel threatened by another young person due to the illusion that young people can't do drastic harm) and under-acknowledged the act and named it as another behaviour despite the behaviour meeting the legislative stalking criteria.

Young people may illicit this behaviour as a protective measure such as using technology to learn about a potential romantic interest, however, it should be noted that this behaviour does not meet the criteria of stalking as the target is unaware of it so therefore it is difficult to determine if fear would be present (Worthington, 2023).

Young people are also likely to engage in cyberbullying and cyberstalking as the time they spend on digital platforms is higher than adults. Vente, et al (2020) study found that 93% of participants (aged between 12-21) engaged in at least 1 hour of social media per day with 3-5 hours being the most common reported (35%).

Conversely, Pereira, Spitzberg and Matos (2016) found that 66.1% of cyber-harassment victims were also perpetrators. However, it is unknown whether victims originate by being targeted and then evolve into a perpetrator via feelings of rejection due to their victimisation status. Alternatively, the opposite may occur whereby the stalker becomes the victim (Worthington, 2023). A dual victim-perpetrator role occurs also known as the victim-perpetrator overlap model. This dual role may occur because of the normalisation of the behaviours within peer groups. This normalisation prevents young people from reporting the behaviour firstly because they view it as normal and secondly, they risk reputational damage especially if they are being targeted by a peer (ibid).

Another justification for this prevalence is the impact of parental bonding and attachment between young people and their guardians. In short, that early child-parent relationships can impact on an individual's idea of what a relationship should be, and this is carried through to adulthood (Scarr & Kennedy, 2023). Research by McKenzie, et al (2008) indicates that stalkers are more likely to have an insecure attachment style when compared to the general population. Attachment theory was implemented into stalking research by Meloy in 1992, who defined stalking behaviours as extreme forms of attachment (Patton, Nobles and Fox, 2010). Dysfunctional attachment along with jealousy, anger and a need for control was also found to be linked to stalking behaviours (ibid).

Labelling of a young person as a criminal cause them to be stigmatised and ultimately, they find it difficult to escape that label. It can impact on their development and therefore their behaviours. This is because this label can become their 'master status' and they feel obligated to uphold it (Ugwudike, 2015). Worthington (2023) highlights the dangers of labelling a young person as a 'stalker', especially when their behaviour does not meet the threshold as it can impact on their development. Labelling can have long-lasting consequences for young people as this label can often follow them into adulthood and it can be difficult to eradicate.

The Impacts of Stalking on Young People

It is important to acknowledge the explanations for adolescent stalking behaviours so that the impacts of stalking victimisation on young people can be understood and effective interventions can be adopted.

It was found that young people suffer from high levels of anxiety from their stalking victimisation, and this impacted on their schooling (Purcell et al, 2009). Young people also reported to experiencing severe depression and suicidal thoughts with many parents also experiencing anxiety and economic losses from having to enrol their child at another school or home school them (ibid). The significance with victimisation in adolescents is that these negative impacts occur at the developmental stage in a young person's life so therefore may be long-lasting and extending into adulthood (Roberts et al, 2016).

This is reinforced by Ravensberg & Miller (2003) study that if young people are victimised then it effects their development in two ways. One, it violates their sense of privacy and safety, causing fear and weakening their confidence. Two, it may hinder their ability to seek intimacy. This causes young adults who were stalked to be reluctant to trust others which affects their relationships. Victims also questioned their ability to distinguish who to trust and not trust, especially if they were stalked by an ex-partner (ibid).

Villacampa and Pujols (2019) highlighted the psychological impacts of stalking victimisation on university students and found that 37% had difficulties concentrating, 34% felt vulnerable, 32% had lost self-confidence, 30% suffered from anxiety, 27% suffered from insomnia or sleep disorders, 20% had difficulties in relationships, 11% had depression and 6% suffered from panic attacks.

Exploring the impacts of stalking victimisation on young people not only assists with understanding the different ways in which stalking affects them and their loved ones but it also helps ensure that interventions are enabled early to prevent long-lasting impacts on development that proceeds into adulthood.

Interventions to Reduce Victimisation and Perpetration

Exploring the prevalence of stalking amongst adolescents as well as the explanations for this enables the discovery of interventions to prevent stalking victimisation early to eradicate the long-lasting impacts to young people's development.

Early and Effective Intervention (EEI) is a term widely used in youth justice. There are several organisations in the United Kingdom that work directly with young people and educational settings to increase awareness around stalking and gender-based violence.

The first is the Alice Ruggles Trust which is a charity set-up by the parents of Alice Ruggles, who was murdered by her ex-partner after a prolonged period of stalking. They have created programmes in partnership with St Mary's University such as 'Stalking Awareness for Education Environments' (SAfEE) which gives those working in educational settings qualifications around understanding stalking and coercive control. The SAfEE programme is split into three components. The first is a CPD course called 'Recognising Stalking, Relationship Abuse and Coercive Control' and lasts the duration of three hours. The aim is to educate professionals across a range of sectors about identifying the signs of stalking and coercive control as well as the steps to take if someone discloses that they are being stalked. The second option is a one day 'SAfEE Ambassadors' qualification which is designed for those working with young people in educational environments. The programme is designed to assist educators in recognising signs of stalking and tips on how to support young people who disclose their stalking victimisation. The third is the 'SAfEE Campaigner' two-day course designed to assist organisations in creating their own stalking awareness campaigns via tips on how to research, plan, and execute a successful campaign (The Alice Ruggles Trust, n.d).

Another initiative is The Emily Test, which was founded by the mother of Emily Drouet who was a victim of gender-based violence, including stalking, by her fellow student and partner. Emily took her own life because of this ongoing behaviour. The charity was developed due to the inadequate response Emily received from her university and the lack of support she received. The charity established the Gender-Based Violence Charter which provides a 'toolbox' and coaching for Universities and Colleges in Scotland to effectively prevent,

intervene and respond to gender-based violence. Educational establishments can apply to become a member of the charter, but they must meet 40 minimum standards across 5 key principles all aimed at ensuring that students receive support when they disclose that they are a victim of gender-based violence. The charity has training which assists with the adoption of minimum standards such as ‘L.I.S.T.E.N Risk Assessment Training’ which educates staff in how to best support students in a safe and healthy way. They also provide the ‘Aware and Empowerment Education Programme (A&E)’ in partnership with City of Glasgow College to increase awareness regarding gender-based violence and empower others to help prevent it. The charter has been adopted by the majority if not all Scottish universities and colleges and the charity is now working across England and Wales (The Emily Test, n.d).

Paladin is an organisation that works directly with young people who have been victims of stalking through their Young Peoples Team by offering them safety advice and support. In 2019, Paladin established their ‘youth ambassadors’ programme. It enables 16–20-year-olds to volunteer with the charity. The youth ambassadors are given specialist training and run workshops for young people educating them about stalking, they consult at conferences, trainings and with other organisations social media content as well as help raise funds for the charity. The aim of youth ambassadors is to help develop the service and give young stalking victims a voice (Paladin Service, n.d).

Other organisations across the globe have projects designed to support adolescent stalking victims. An example is Safe Horizon which operates in New York in the U.S. Safe Horizon supports victims of gender-based violence including stalking and have created a Community Program named ‘Campus Sexual Assault Program’. This programme supports colleges and universities in the way they respond to gender-based violence on campus. Universities and colleges can partake in awareness raising workshops, trauma-informed training, prevention training and intervention training (Safe Horizon, n.d).

Stalking Awareness, Prevention and Resource Centre (SPARC) is an organisation that works across the U.S spreading awareness of stalking via a research and evidence-based approach. The organisation focuses on different aspects within stalking and one of these is stalking on college campuses. They offer online webinars focused on stalking within this cohort to raise awareness and educate providers on how to best support victims. (SPARC, n.d.)

However, despite the organisations stated there are still little projects that focus primarily on supporting young stalking victims and even less on tackling perpetrator behaviours. Purcell et al (2009) states that EEI is compelling when considering stalking programmes with adolescents however, currently there is little of it. As highlighted adolescent stalking is an extension of bullying so future interventions should focus on targeting bullying behaviours and thus most stalking behaviours will be eliminated.

Anti-bullying interventions have been implemented and researched throughout the decades with varied success. Farrington and Ttofi (2009) study found that interventions focused on targeting bullying behaviour produced a 20-23% decrease in bullying and a 17-20% decrease in being bullied. However, this is not universal as programme success differs depending on the rigorous designs and evaluation provided. Due to this some programmes were found to have no positive effects on the reduction of bullying behaviours and victimisation (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). The factors that create a successful anti-bullying intervention was the duration meaning that the longer the programme, the higher the success rate. Also, the inclusion of parental training and discipline assisted with a programme's success (ibid).

The idea of involving peers in the success of such interventions is interesting considering research highlights that stalking behaviours are oftentimes normalised between this group. Therefore, relying on them to become an active bystander that reports or intervenes in this type of behaviour is thought-provoking and should be researched further.

Worthingham (2023) explained that when considering interventions for young adults who stalk, psychological treatments are considered, however there is minimal research on this and the effectiveness of interventions out with an ex-intimate relationship. There is also a lack of evidence on whether interventions assist with prevention or treatment when exploring stalking and young people.

Despite the lack of evidence, one thing that these interventions and projects have in common is the importance of awareness raising to influence behaviours and attitudes, eradicate myths, and campaign for change.

Limitations

It should be noted that the majority of research focused on young people takes place within an educational setting, so further exploration of stalking in young people out with an educational setting is required.

Despite several of these works used in this article being decades old, they are relevant in showcasing the prevalence of stalking within younger demographics however they highlight the need for updated research within this field.

The topic of the effectiveness of interventions and treatment options for adolescents that possess stalking behaviours must be explored further along with the effectiveness of bullying interventions in decreasing levels of stalking behaviour amongst adolescents.

Previous adolescent stalking research was also conducted by measuring young people's experiences with adult measuring tools and with the same stalking criteria used for adults. However, the same criteria cannot be used when studying young people as the 5 (incidents) + 2 (in 2 weeks) + fear (victim felt fearful) model does not fit accurately with this cohort. This is due to young people communicating differently from their adult counterparts e.g., young people will send multiple messages without waiting for a response showcasing that their communication is impulsive. This is highlighted in findings by Lenhart et al (2010) that young people send 50 texts per day compared to adults who send 10. With the increase and accessibility of technology this statistic has undoubtedly increased within the last 12 years.

The language in which young people describe stalking may also not meet the legal requirement i.e., investigating someone's new partner on social media to gather evidence is not considered a crime. This is because it is done without the individual's knowledge so therefore it is difficult to determine the fear and alarm required in law. This cohorts' views of what constitutes stalking behaviour or victimisation is different to adults' (Worthington, 2023).

The legitimacy of contact between young people must be considered as young people do not have the same geographical mobility as their adult counterparts so their relationships will be based around their residence, school, and social activities (ibid). This causes complexity as a young person may claim to be stalked by another, however if they attend the same school and have the same social circles it makes the accused's location legitimate.

Further research should focus on adult stalkers targeting young people and the risks that this may impose, especially when regarding a young person's lack of fear and increased need for independence and risk taking.

Conclusion

Stalking can be found in both adult and youth demographics; however, young people are more at risk of stalking victimisation when compared to the general population. This prevalence is due to developmental immaturity, lack of experience navigating emotions and behaviours and the structure of young people's lifestyles.

Bullying is the key motivator for the stalking behaviours amongst young people so they can continue their persistent pursuit beyond the educational environment. As well as young people being more likely to target their estranged peers of the same sex.

However, there is complexities when understanding stalking and young people as oftentimes this cohort view stalking behaviours out with the criteria required for law and when compared to adult groups. Young people's biology affects their behaviour and with their young age comes risk-taking, limited empathy and reduction in feelings of fear so partaking in stalking behaviours is normalised especially when many adolescents are both victims and perpetrators.

The impacts of stalking on young people can affect their development which then follows them into adulthood creating psychological and social issues especially when building relationships. Also, labelling a young person as a 'stalker' implicates their development pathways especially when their behaviour doesn't meet the criteria set out by law.

There are several initiatives that support young people and strive to spread awareness and education to those in an educational environment, but more work must be done to understand the effectiveness of interventions and treatments to not only reduce stalking behaviours but to protect victims.

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