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Majoring in stalking: Exploring stalking experiences between college students and the general public

Patrick Q. Brady, M.A.
Leana A. Bouffard, Ph.D.

Much of what we know about stalking stems largely from studies of college students. Despite the lack of uniformity across empirical definitions and state legislation, stalking is a crime in all 50 states and is generally defined as a repeat course of conduct that is directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2014). Stalking most commonly occurs between current or former intimate partners, with the highest rates of victimization occurring among individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 (Baum et al., 2009). Given these risk factors, coupled with the high-risk lifestyles (e.g., autonomy, prevalence of substance abuse) and the routine nature of college-life (e.g., regularly scheduled classes, living/working on or close to campus), scholars suggest that college students are at a higher risk for stalking victimization than the general public (Fisher et al., 2002). Despite the growing literature on campus crime, very few studies have directly compared victimization experiences between students and nonstudents, especially in regards to stalking.

To address this gap in the literature, the following research brief provides a summary of results from a recent study designed to explore stalking experiences between college students and the general public.

Sample

The current study draws from the 2006 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) Stalking Victimization Supplement (SVS), which includes a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents 18 years of age and older. The SVS is a one-time supplemental survey that was designed to collect information on the extent and nature of stalking victimization at the national-level. After completing the NCVS, respondents were then asked a series of behaviorally-specific screening questions to establish whether they had experienced some form of stalking within the preceding 12 months.

Respondents were identified as victims of stalking if they reported having ever felt "fearful, concerned, angered, or annoyed after experiencing two or more unwanted pursuit behaviors (e.g., someone sending unsolicited letters or e-mails, leaving unwanted gifts or items, following or spying, posting information or spreading rumors) from a given perpetrator, or experienced a single unwanted pursuit behavior on more than one occasion (Baum et al., 2009, p. 12). Of the 65,261 adults who were asked the SVS screening questions, 1,513 individuals were identified as a victim of stalking. Just over half of the participants of the preliminary SVS questions were female (54%), White or non-Hispanic (84%), with a median age of 46. Overall, weighted prevalence estimates suggest that 1.5% or 5.3 million U.S. adults experienced stalking or harassment within the past 12 months (Baum et al., 2009).

In order to examine stalking experiences across the two populations, the sample was divided into college students and the general public. Of the 65,091 SVS participants, 6% ($n = 3,866$) indicated that they were currently enrolled in a college/university at the time of the survey. Conversely, the remaining 94% ($n = 60,730$) consists of individuals who were not attending college at the time of the survey.

Traditional & Tech-Facilitated Stalking Victimization

Prevalence estimates of stalking vary due to methodological issues with definitions and measurements of stalking. Estimates of stalking victimization within the last year range from 1% to 6.5% for women, and 0.4% to 2.1% for men (Breiding et al., 2014; Black et al., 2010; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). The most recent national study suggests that 15.2% of women (18.3 million) and 5.7% of men (6.5 million) have experienced some form of stalking during their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014). Additionally, 4.2% of women

(5.1 million) and 2.1% of men (2.4 million) were stalked within the last year.

While national-level studies of stalking have provided estimates for the general public, there have been relatively few national studies of stalking among college students. In a national study of college females, Fisher et al. (2002) found that 13.1% of female college students had experienced at least one stalking episode within the last academic year. Other smaller scale studies have shown prevalence estimates of stalking among college students to range from 12.2% to 40.4% (Stewart & Fisher, 2013), leading scholars to suggest that college students are at a higher risk for stalking victimization.

The first analysis in the current study focuses on addressing the question of whether or not college students experience higher rates of stalking than the general public. Bivariate analyses indicated that both past year and lifetime estimates of stalking victimization among college students were significantly higher than the general public (see Figure 1). While 4.3% of college students experienced stalking within the past year, this occurred for only 2.2% of the general public ($\chi^2 = 66.82, p < .01$). Moreover, a significantly larger proportion of college students experienced stalking at some point in their life, compared to individuals not attending college (7.8% vs. 4.8%, respectively; $\chi^2 = 69.40, p < .01$).

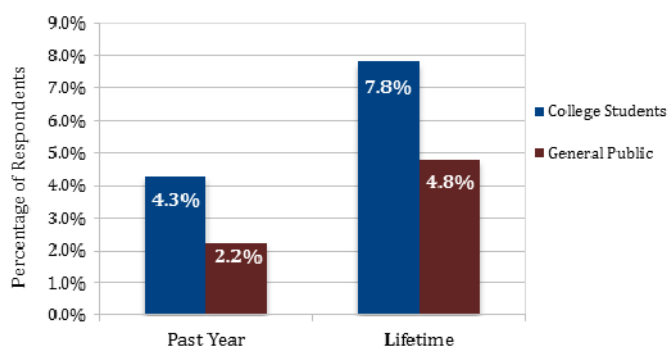


Figure 1: Past Year and Lifetime Prevalence of Stalking Victimization

Stalking behaviors can occur in both virtual and non-virtual environments. While this form of stalking is commonly referred to as “cyberstalking”, it is important to note that stalking perpetrators utilize a diverse array of technological devices beyond computers and the Internet. Advances in technology have made it increasingly easier for perpetrators to anonymously monitor and harass their victims through low-cost devices and software. Stalking through the use of technology (i.e., tech-facilitated stalking) can involve surveillance behaviors in which a perpetrator tracks a person’s location through a GPS device, through audio/video recording devices, content posted on a social-networking site (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.), or by sending e-mails that contain malicious spyware. Spyware programs can be inconspicuously installed and allow offenders to remotely access a victim’s computer and/or receive information about the victim’s online activities including their keystrokes, the content of their e-mails and the websites they visited.

Cyberstalking has recently become a popular area of criminological inquiry, yet much of what we know about tech-

facilitated stalking is derived from studies involving convenience samples of college students. Similar to traditional forms of stalking, scholars suggest that college students experience tech-facilitated stalking at higher rates than the general public (Stewart & Fisher, 2013). National estimates suggest that one in four stalking victims reported experiencing some form of “cyberstalking” within the last year (Baum et al., 2009). Conversely, Reynolds et al. (2012) found that 40.8% of college students experienced stalking within their lifetime.

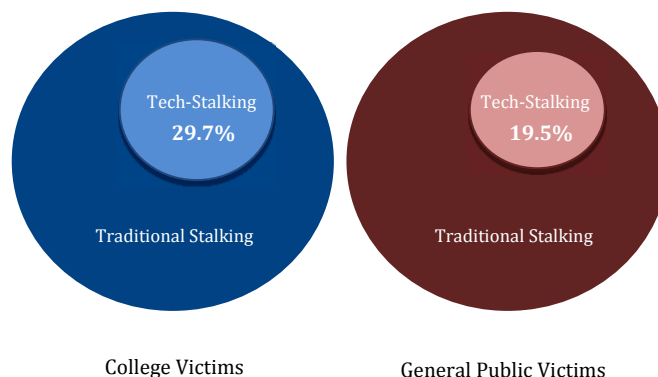


Figure 2: Stalking Through The Use of Technology

The second analysis examined the prevalence of tech-facilitated stalking across the two populations (see Figure 2). While there are some instances where individuals may only be stalked through the use of technology, Nobles et al. (2012) argues that most victims of tech-facilitated stalking exist as a smaller subset of victims who experience traditional forms of stalking as well. Questions about tech-facilitated stalking were only asked to respondents who met the criteria for traditional stalking victimizations within the last year.

Stalking victims experienced tech-facilitated stalking if they responded yes to one or more questions about being electronically monitored (e.g., GPS, spyware, video/digital cameras) and/or harassed or threatened via the Internet (via e-mail, instant messenger, blogs, message boards, etc.). Bivariate analyses indicated that one in three college stalking victims also experienced tech-facilitated stalking (29.7%), compared to one in five stalking victims in the general public (19.5%), ($\chi^2 = 8.80, p < .01$).

Stalking Acknowledgement

Stalking acknowledgement refers to the capacity of victims to identify their repeated, unwanted pursuit behaviors as ‘stalking’, per say (Ngo, 2011). Understanding the factors that influence a victim’s perception of stalking is an important area of criminological inquiry. Stalking acknowledgement has not only been linked to reporting (Reyns & Englebrecht, 2010), but can also contribute to the development of effective response policies and prevention campaigns for both college campuses and the general public.

While there are a limited number of studies on stalking acknowledgement, many have shown that the proportion of victims who label their experiences as “stalking” are fairly similar between college and non-college populations. While 38.3% of a national sample of stalking victims identified the unwanted

pursuit behaviors as stalking (Baum et al. 2009), this was true for 42.1% of college female victims of stalking (Jordan et al. 2007).

Among a sample of 1,010 college females, Jordan et al. (2007) found that stalking acknowledgement was influenced by victims who experienced multiple forms of stalking and reported higher levels of fear. Using data from the SVS, Ngo (2011) found that stalking acknowledgement was more common among victims who feared for their safety, were younger, non-White, and experiencing unwanted surveillance behaviors where the perpetrator followed them or waited outside/inside their home, school, work, or place of recreation.

In the current analysis, findings suggest that, compared to victims in the non-college subsample (30.5%), a significantly larger proportion of college students who were stalked self-identified their experiences as “stalking” (37.1%), ($\chi^2 = 4.18, p < .01$). Overall estimates are consistent with the extant scholarship.

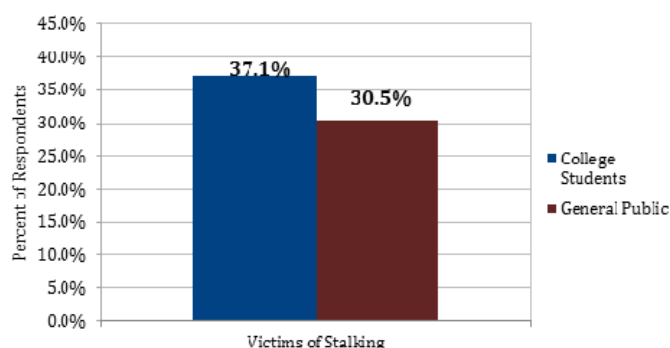


Figure 3: Prevalence of Stalking Acknowledgement

Reporting Stalking to the Police

Stalking is a crime that continues to remain largely underreported to law enforcement. The extant literature suggests that 50% to 80% of stalking cases are *not* reported to the police (Baum et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2002). Common justifications for not reporting include fear of retaliation, minimization of the incident, and concern that law enforcement could not help (Baum et al., 2009). The final analyses investigated the extent to which college and non-college students contacted the police. Overall, differences in reporting were only marginally significant between the two subsamples ($\chi^2 = 2.96, p = .085$). Unlike the previous analyses, only a quarter of college stalking victims

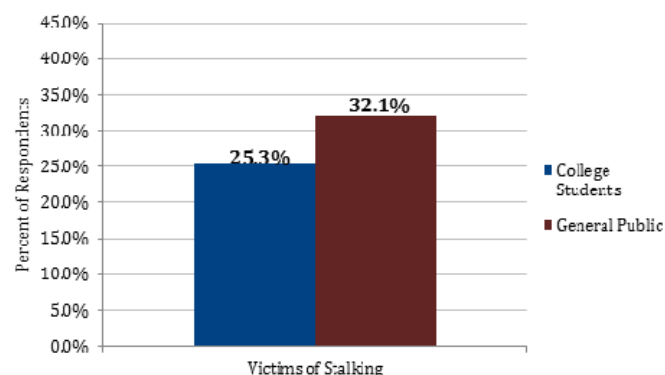


Figure 4: Proportion of Stalking Victims Who Contacted Law Enforcement

contacted the police, compared to 32.1% of victims within the general public.

Conclusion

The extant literature is rich with empirical investigations of perpetration and victimization of interpersonal violence among college students. There exists, however, an ongoing debate among scholars and policy makers regarding the generalizability of the findings from college-based samples and their implications across other populations (Henry, 2008). The stalking literature is not immune from this issue, as much of what we know about stalking derives from studies using convenience samples of college students.

The purpose of this research brief is to provide an overview of stalking experiences between college students and the general public. Overall, traditional and tech-facilitated stalking victimizations were more common among college students than the general public. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that college students are at a higher risk for stalking victimization (Fisher et al., 2002; Stewart & Fisher, 2013).

While stalking acknowledgement was higher among college students than the general public (37.1% vs. 30.5%, respectively), this was not true in regards to reporting to the police. Indeed, 32.1% of victims in the general public contacted law enforcement about their stalking experiences, compared to only 25.3% of college victims. While differences in reporting were only marginally significant, this finding is still alarming given that 70 – 75% of stalking victims did *not* contact the police.

Stalking is a dangerous and complex crime that is in much need of further attention from universities, legislatures, and public policy makers. Given the pervasiveness of the issue, campus administrators, school personnel, and public safety officials need to consider the seriousness of the crime and tailor their efforts to proactively address stalking among college campuses and the general public through effective strategies of prevention and intervention.

The findings from the current analysis suggest that more is needed to build the capacity of universities and public safety officials to systematically address the barriers that inhibit victims from reporting. Additionally, universities need to ensure that they have the resources necessary to appropriately respond to reports of stalking and other forms of interpersonal violence. One resource that should be particularly effective for university policy makers is *The Model Stalking Policy for College Campuses* publication that was recently released by the Stalking Resource Center see <http://www.victimsofcrime.org/our-programs/stalking-resource-center/resources/publications>

More recently, key federal mandates such as the *Clery Act* or the *Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act* (20 U.S.C. 1092[f]), have been established to foster victim rights and to hold Title IX universities accountable by ensuring that victimizations on college campuses are handled more appropriately. These mandates also require universities to provide prevention programming to educate and raise awareness among students and school personnel regarding domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking.

In regards to prevention programming, universities and communities should invest resources into comprehensive programs that emphasize both awareness and skill-based initiatives that provide individuals with the skills and resources needed to handle potentially high-risk situations. More recently, findings from numerous evaluations have identified bystander prevention programs as a promising practice to reduce and prevent sexual assault on college campuses (Katz & Moore, 2013).

While college students may be a ripe resource for empirical inquires of stalking, it is important to continue exploring the experiences of individuals within the general public. Stalking is a serious and unpredictable crime that demands the attention of community agencies, universities, and the criminal justice system. Through effective and collaborative practices of capacity building, policy development, and prevention programming, college campuses and communities can systematically reduce and prevent incidents of stalking and other forms of interpersonal violence.

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