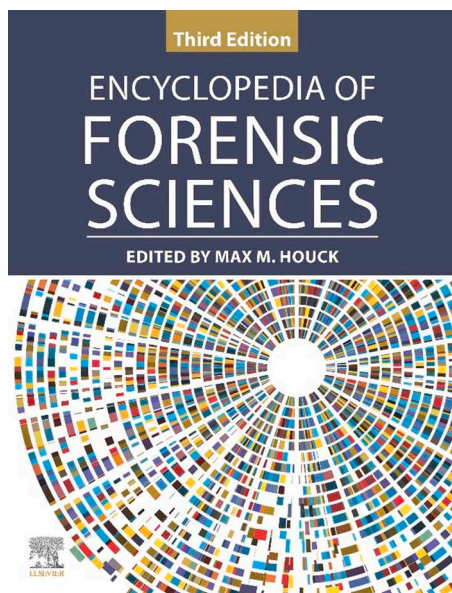


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Meloy, J. Reid and McEwan, Troy E. (2023) Stalking. In: Max M. Houck (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Forensic Sciences, Third Edition*, vol. 4, pp. 611–616. Oxford: Elsevier.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-823677-2.00058-1>

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## Stalking

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This is an update of J.R. Meloy, Stalking, Editor(s): Jay A. Siegel, Pekka J. Saukko, Max M. Houck, Encyclopedia of Forensic Sciences (Second Edition), Academic Press, 2013, Pages 202–205, ISBN 9780123821669, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-382165-2.00036-2>.

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### Abstract

Stalking is a pattern of unwanted following that threatens the safety and well being of the victim. It is a crime throughout the English-speaking world, and in many other countries. Most victims of stalking are women, and most stalkers are men. The most likely victims of stalking are young women who have had a prior sexually intimate relationship with the perpetrator. In these cases, risk of physical violence during the stalking is high, occurring in at least one in five cases. Threats are very common, and are related to risk of violence. Among those who stalk strangers or acquaintances, risk of physical violence is significantly less, but stalking often persists for longer periods, particularly when the stalker is affected by psychosis. Effective risk management of stalking cases usually depends on a combination of mental health and law enforcement intervention, and there remains a lack of research about effective ways to treat stalking behavior.

### Glossary

**Attachment** A psychobiologically based behavioral system which is present in humans from birth and is evident in seeking physical closeness to the love object. In infancy this is the mother; in adulthood it is often the sexually intimate partner.

**Envy** The wish to damage or destroy the goodness in another.

**Fixation** Preoccupation with a person or cause that results in deterioration in social and occupational functioning.

**Jealousy** A response to a perceived threat to a valued relationship, often another person, that is accompanied by feelings of suspiciousness, uncertainty, anger and sadness, and often by behavior intended to restore control over the relationship.

**Obsession** Unwanted, repetitive, frequent thoughts which cause anxiety and may impair the daily functioning of the person.

**Psychosis** A generic term for a loss of contact with consensual reality and the creation of a private, bizarre, idiosyncratic reality; may have a variety of psychological and psychiatric causes.

**Validation** To scientifically demonstrate the usefulness of a measure.

### Key Points

- Stalking is a pattern of unwanted pursuit that threatens the safety and well being of the victim.
- Most victims of stalking are women, and most stalkers are men.
- The most violent stalkers are those who have had a prior sexually intimate relationship with the victim
- Effective risk management is a combination of mental health and law enforcement intervention.
- Effective treatment of stalkers and their behavior needs more research.

## Introduction

Stalking is an old behavior, but a new crime. In this article we review the elements of stalking, the epidemiology of both the perpetrators and victims of stalking, and the two most useful typologies for understanding different groups of stalkers. The thoughts and emotions of stalkers are detailed, based upon an enormous amount of research that has been conducted since it first became a criminology topic thirty years ago. The final important aspect of stalking-its impact on victims-is explicated, and four major recommendations for the risk management of stalking behavior are outlined.

The crime of stalking contains three elements: (1) a pattern of unwanted contact with the victim; (2) the intent to cause harm (or being reckless as to the potential for harm); and (3) the victim experiencing psychological harm as a result of the pattern of behavior. Without victim awareness and impact, there is no crime of stalking. This eliminates the inappropriate application of the term “stalking” to describe violent crimes in which some form of surveillance precedes an attack, such as rape or robbery. Unwanted pursuit and sustained fear or distress for the victim are the *sine qua non* of stalking.

Large scale representative studies of stalking across three continents indicate that 7%–36% of females and 2%–29% of males will be victimized by a stalker at some point in their adult lives (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2014). These figures encompass clinical, forensic, general population, and college samples. Women are the targets of stalking in 80% of cases in the criminal justice system, but in the general population males account for at least 30% of stalking victims (Spitzberg et al., 2010). 70%–80% of stalkers are male, and approximately 85% of stalking cases involve opposite gender dyads (Spitzberg et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2014). Approximately 45% of all stalking cases involve a prior sexual intimate as the perpetrator, followed by people who are acquaintances of the victim, with around one in five stalkers being strangers to the victim (Spitzberg et al., 2010). The modal duration of stalking in both epidemiological and forensic samples is between one and six months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Mohandie et al., 2006), but the average duration is longer and at least a quarter of people are stalked for more than a year (Dreßing et al., 2020). In at least 50% of stalking cases in the criminal justice system, victims report further contact even after police intervention or conviction at court (Eke et al., 2011; McEwan et al., 2020). Unfortunately, stalking is a crime that has only received attention in Westernized developed countries, although other areas of the world are beginning to take notice (Chan et al., 2020).

## Typologies of Stalking

Two of the more widely used typologies of stalkers focus upon clinical and operational concerns. The clinical typology was developed by Mullen et al. (2009) at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health in Melbourne, Australia, and consists of five groups: (1) the rejected, (2) the resentful, (3) the socially incompetent, (4) the intimacy seeking, and (5) the sexually predatory. There is a growing body of work which utilizes this typology for assessment, treatment and management of both stalkers and their victims (Purcell and McEwan, 2018; McEwan et al., 2018). The operational typology of stalking is called RECON (relationship and context), and identifies four groups of stalkers: (1) those who target prior intimates, (2) prior acquaintances, (3) public figures, and (4) private strangers. This typology was developed utilizing a large nonrandom sample of stalkers (N = 1005) in North America, and showed good interrater reliability and discriminant validity (Mohandie et al., 2006). It was created for use by law enforcement and security professionals. Both typologies are useful to help guide thinking in stalking cases, and have utility in informing risk assessment and management (McEwan and Davis, 2020).

## Stalking Behavior

Stalking can involve almost any behavior, but generally includes some combination of mediated and/or direct communication with the victim (e.g., telephone calls, approaching the person to speak to them) and/or monitoring of the victim. Stalkers can also co-opt others into their pursuit, either by also targeting people affiliated with the victim, or by recruiting proxies from their friendship group, family, or even professionals such as law enforcement to target the victim on their behalf. Spitzberg and Cupach (2014) suggest that stalking tactics can be usefully themed by function:

- (1) Hyperintimacy – excessive or inappropriate expressions of desire for a relationship;
- (2) Surveillance – covert efforts to monitor or obtain information,
- (3) Invasion – violation of legal or social privacy boundaries,
- (4) Harassment and intimidation – introducing challenges into the victims intended to lower their quality of life and/or change their behavior,
- (5) Coercion and threat – statements or actions that imply or make explicit that something bad will happen to the victim, and
- (6) Aggression and violence – actions intended to physically harm the victim or others.

While stalking behavior has existed for many years (Meloy, 1999), technological changes over the past two decades have meant that stalking can now occur in both online and on the ground environments (Cavezza and McEwan, 2014). Often referred to as “cyberstalking”, the use of the internet and technology to stalk appears to be relatively common in stalking episodes, though definitional problems plague the literature and make it difficult to estimate prevalence (Wilson et al., 2021). It is clear that cyberstalking often occurs in conjunction with on the ground stalking behavior, but a stalking episode can also take place completely online. At present it is unclear whether purely online stalking is as potentially harmful as on the ground stalking, though it can be enormously detrimental to some of those targeted (Short et al., 2014).

Between 20% and 50% of stalkers will be physically violent toward their victim during the course of their pursuit (McEwan, 2021). Violence is more common when the stalker is a prior sexual intimate of the victim, and can exceed 50% in samples of former partner stalkers in some criminal justice settings. This frequently replicated finding may suggest that sexual intimacy intensifies attraction, attachment, and emotional reactivity when a bond is threatened (Meloy, 2007). Violence in stalking is either unplanned (affective) or planned (instrumental). Unplanned violence in stalking situations occurs in the context of heightened autonomic arousal, anger or fear, and the presence of a perceived threat (often fear of abandonment). That said, some people who stalk engage in far more planned and purposeful acts of aggression that are carefully thought out and intended to cause maximum fear and distress; this may be observed in rare cases when a public figure is stalked and attacked. These two modes of violence are generally psychobiologically distinctive in mammals, including humans (Meloy, 2006). While most stalking violence does not cause significant injury, homicides do occur in a very small number of stalking cases (James and Farnham, 2003). However, the prevalence of stalking and the infrequency with which homicides occur means that stalking behavior per se is not a particularly useful risk factor for homicide (McEwan, 2021).

### Stalking Risk Factors

Research has focused on risk factors for stalking violence and continued stalking of the same victim (stalking persistence). A 2013 meta-analysis of 25 studies suggested that a prior sexually intimate relationship, threats to the stalking victim, and the absence of a psychotic disorder are the strongest predictors of violence during a stalking episode. Weaker positive relationships were identified for personality disorder, substance use by the stalker, and a history of prior violence (Churcher and Nesca, 2013). Research since that time has been largely consistent with these findings, and has suggested that stalking behaviors involving increased proximity to the victim (approach behavior) also predicts violence (McEwan, 2021). People who persistently stalk their victims have a higher rate of psychotic disorder and are more likely to stalk acquaintances. This could explain why acquaintance stalking tends to be more persistent than other types of stalking. Those who engage in more extensive communication, different forms of communication, and communication involving greater effort (e.g., sending gifts or written material) also seem to stalk for longer periods (McEwan, 2021). A smaller literature has considered risk factors for serial stalking: the stalking of different victims over time. Only two studies have explicitly investigated this outcome, suggesting that between 17% and 30% of stalkers assessed in a forensic context are subsequently reported to police for stalking a different person (McEwan et al., 2020; Shea, 2015). In both studies, having multiple previous episodes of stalking was associated with increased chances of stalking another person in the future. Previous general criminal history, and a history of violence were also related to serial stalking. There is also some research suggesting that personality disorder may be a risk factor for serial stalking (McEwan, 2021).

Two comprehensive risk assessment instruments specifically for stalking have been published; the *Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management* (SAM; Kropp et al., 2008) and the *Stalking Risk Profile* (SRP; MacKenzie et al., 2009). Both are structured professional judgment guidelines and have been subject to some validation, with mixed results. The SAM has been subject to more evaluation, but in three out of four studies SAM risk judgments were not related to future stalking. The SRP has only one published validation study, which suggested a satisfactory level of predictive validity, but further research is clearly required. More recently, a brief tool to aid threat assessment was published, the *Screening Assessment for Stalking and Harassment* (SASH; McEwan et al., 2017). This tool does not provide a comprehensive risk assessment, but is designed to help frontline professionals (e.g., police, victim support agencies) prioritize cases based on apparent level of concern. There is a single validation study of the SASH, suggesting an adequate level of predictive validity for future stalking of the same person; but again, further validation research is required (McEwan, 2021).

### Characteristics of Stalkers

Adult stalkers who attract criminal justice attention are usually males in their fourth decade of life with prior psychiatric, drug abuse, and criminal histories. They often have both a major mental illness and a personality disorder (Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018). Epidemiological research suggests that approximately 20%–30% of stalkers are female, though they are under-represented in criminal justice settings (Spitzberg et al., 2010). Female stalkers are more likely than male stalkers to target someone of the same sex and to pursue an acquaintance, and are less likely than males to pursue a stranger. Women seem more likely to stalk in pursuit of a relationship, whereas a larger proportion of male stalkers appear to be motivated by grievance or resentment towards the target (Meloy and Boyd, 2003; Meloy et al., 2011; Purcell et al., 2001). While fewer female stalkers have a history of violent criminality or substance abuse, threat and assault rates during the stalking are, on average, the same as among men (Strand and McEwan, 2012). However, the more intimate the relationship had been prior to the stalking, the greater the risk of violence, with similar risk factors identified in female and male stalkers (Meloy et al., 2011). The most common documented emotion among the women was anger, particularly abandonment rage. The most common personality diagnosis was borderline personality disorder, with one study suggesting significantly higher rates of personality disorder among female stalkers. Regardless of stalker gender, major mental illness and personality disorder are common among those who stalk and bring them into contact with criminal justice systems (Wheatley et al., 2020); this necessitates a psychiatric and psychological evaluation to discern the best approach to treatment and risk management (MacKenzie and James, 2011).

Stalkers are preoccupied with thoughts of their object of pursuit. If a fixation is functionally defined as an abnormal frequency of preoccupation with an object, substantial data indicate that such thinking and rumination are the most common cognitive traits of those who stalk (Purcell and McEwan, 2018; McEwan, 2021). The content of the stalker's conscious thoughts varies from case to case, but thinking is generally characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. Examples include the juxtaposition of statements

that both idealize and devalue the victim; the wish for complete freedom for the victim alongside demands for complete control of the victim; or statements of rage commingled with yearnings for love and affection.

The paradox of stalking is that an individual is pursued that is continuously rejecting the stalker. It can be usefully understood in many cases as a pathology of attachment (Meloy, 1998, 2007). Attachment is a biologically rooted, species-specific behavioral system that is either secure or insecure, and in cases of stalking, the attachment pathology is insecure and often *preoccupied*. Kienlen and colleagues first found in a small sample of imprisoned stalkers that the majority had lost a primary caretaker in childhood and had also suffered a major loss within a year prior to the onset of stalking. These two findings suggest both predisposing and precipitating events that may contribute to the onset of stalking (Kienlen, 1998). Subsequent research has suggested that people who stalk typically remember their parents as emotionally neglectful and often have insecure attachment styles (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2008).

The preoccupations and contradictions which characterize the stalker's thinking may be rooted in "narcissistic linking fantasies", recurrent thoughts of a special and unique relationship with the love object (Meloy, 1998). Such fantasies are normal in the initial stages of romance or infatuation, yet in the case of stalking, they are met with rejection when acted upon, and they usher in emotions of intense humiliation and rage that the stalker will express toward the victim. In normal men and women, romantic rejection often triggers feelings of grief, anger, and sadness, and the search for a new love object. When pathological narcissism predominates, such as one sees among stalkers, the intensity of their fury is a measure of their degree of ego deflation, and may accelerate their pursuit.

Intense emotions are ubiquitous among people who stalk, and likely play a role in both precipitating and maintaining stalking behavior (Purcell and McEwan, 2018). While a wide range of emotions contribute to stalking, two of the most frequently observed are anger and jealousy (Mullen *et al.*, 2009). Such feelings are often consciously felt and acknowledged, but often defend against other more vulnerable feelings and deficiencies outside of the person's awareness, such as shame, loneliness, isolation, and social inadequacy. Anger can result from frustration of goals and so can fuel the pursuit of the victim out of a desire to change the situation. It may be further motivated by envy to damage or destroy that which cannot be possessed, or a wish to inflict pain upon the one who has inflicted pain, the primitive impulse of *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye. Anger can also repair narcissistic wounds through a fantasized sense of omnipotent control over the victim. While jealousy has rarely been the subject of research in samples of stalkers, it is frequently observed (Mullen, 1996), and has predicted stalking in one study (Mechanic *et al.*, 2000). Jealousy is a complex emotion generated by a perceived threat to a valued relationship and the fear of losing something (or someone) that one believes one possesses. Pathological or morbid jealousy may be apparent in some stalkers and may reach delusional proportions (Mullen, 2007). Jealousy may motivate behavior intended to secure the relationship and prevent the feared loss, resulting in efforts to change and control the victim's behavior.

### Mitigation/Treatments

There is one published study of a randomized and controlled psychological treatment program for stalkers, using an adapted form of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 2019). This study suggested some treatment effect from any psychological intervention (not specifically from DBT), though the effect was not dramatic when compared to recidivism data over the same follow-up period collected from a similar location (Rosenfeld, 2003). In the absence of strong research evidence, support for the effectiveness of mental health interventions is currently based upon anecdotal data and summarized in publications describing "best practice" (Rosenfeld, 2000; Siepelmeyer and Ortiz-Müller, 2020; Meloy, 1997). All such guidelines emphasize the importance of a thorough assessment of the interpersonal context in which the stalking emerged, the function of the behavior for the individual, and the potential role of mental illness or disorder before treatment begins. Where major mental disorder is present and considered relevant to the behavior, specific treatment for this is warranted. This would often be supplemented by psychological and social interventions designed to help the person address psychological vulnerabilities (e.g., unhelpful patterns of thinking and emotional arousal) and develop more adaptive strategies for responding to interpersonal difficulties. Where there is a diagnosis of moderate to severe personality disorder an evidence-based treatment approach for personality disorder should be considered (Leichsenring and Rabung, 2008; Cristea *et al.*, 2017).

### Risk Management

Risk management of stalking cases is long term, difficult, and complex due to the reluctance of law enforcement to prosecute such behavior and the impressive tenacity of some stalkers (Kim and Spitzberg, 2012). Effective risk management encompasses many principles which have been elucidated elsewhere (Pathe, 2002), but generally focuses upon four mitigations:

First, recognizing and responding to stalking is imperative for both stalking victims and for professionals tasked with assisting them. Any unwanted pursuit that induces fear should be recognized as a serious problem, if not a criminal activity, and be treated as such by contacting law enforcement. There is good evidence that police often do not respond effectively to stalking reports, but responses can be improved with specialist understanding and training (Taylor-Dunn *et al.*, 2018; Lynch and Logan, 2015). A growing number of jurisdictions internationally have implemented specialist police and multidisciplinary responses to improve victim safety and the prospects of prosecution (Brandt and Voerman, 2020; Jerath *et al.*, 2020).

Second, stalking victims often attempt to resolve the problem alone. It is imperative that professional help be sought, including contact with both law enforcement and mental health professionals. Stalkers are very often psychiatrically impaired, and efforts to dissuade a stalker often involve simultaneous police and psychiatric interventions (MacKenzie and James, 2011).

Third, stalking victims often unwittingly destroy evidence that is necessary for successful prosecution. It is imperative that all evidence of unwanted pursuit, including notes, letters, emails, objects, gifts, audio and video recordings, text messages, and other

means of communication be kept in a safe place. Stalking laws often require the establishment of a continuity of purpose or course of conduct by the stalker, and such evidence is critical in prosecuting a case against the alleged stalker.

And fourth, stalking victims often decide to initiate contact with the stalker to reason with him/her. It is imperative that all direct contact with the stalker be avoided, especially contact initiated by the victim—although the stalker's ability to continue to communicate his/her thoughts to the victim should not be removed (e.g., email address, telephone number) as a source of intelligence gathering concerning his/her state of mind. If the victim attempts to meet with the stalker, it will probably reinforce his/her behavior, and may increase his/her frequency of pursuit (Meloy and Boyd, 2003). One cannot reason with someone who is behaving unreasonably, and in many cases dangerously.

### Victim Impact

Victim impact in stalking cases can be severe and chronic. Many victims have their personal and professional lives seriously disrupted. More than one-third of stalking victims will incur a psychiatric diagnosis that will persist long after the stalking has ceased (Purcell *et al.*, 2005; Pathe, 2002). Psychological impacts are worse with increased stalking duration and in the presence of explicit threats (Purcell *et al.*, 2012).

### Conclusion

Much is known about the nature and psychopathology of stalking. Over the last 30 years there has been a wealth of cumulative research and understanding that has appeared in the scientific literature. Problems remain, including the enforcement of stalking laws which varies across jurisdictions. In many countries stalking is not considered a crime, and victims are reluctant to report stalking cases; if they do, the law enforcement response can be ineffective. Research concerning the management of stalkers and their victims is limited, but there are efforts in North America, Australia, and Europe to provide interventions that mitigate the risk of further stalking, and provide help to those who suffer the trauma of being stalked. The best outcomes are when both law enforcement and mental health professionals work together to risk manage such cases.

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## Relevant Websites

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Fixed Research Group: FRG
- [www.drreidmeloy.com](http://www.drreidmeloy.com)  
J. Reid Meloy, Ph.D. - Forensic Psychologist
- [www.stalkingriskprofile.com](http://www.stalkingriskprofile.com)  
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