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Adolescent stalking and risk of violence☆

Joanne P. Smith-Darden [a, *], Dennis E. Reidy [b], Poco D. Kernsmith [a]

[a] School of Social Work, Wayne State University, USA
[b] Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, USA

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A B S T R A C T

Stalking perpetration and the associated risk for violence among adolescents has generally been neglected. In the present study, 1236 youth completed surveys assessing empirically established stalking indicators, threats and aggression toward stalking victims, dating violence, and violent delinquency. Latent Profile Analysis identified 3 latent classes of boys: non-perpetrators (NP), hyper-intimate pursuit (HIP), and comprehensive stalking perpetrators (CSP) and, and 2 classes for girls: NP and HIP. Boys in the CSP class were the most violent youth on nearly all indices with boys in the HIP class demonstrating an intermediate level of violence compared to NP boys. Girls in the HIP class were more violent than NP girls on all indices. These findings suggest stalking in adolescence merits attention by violence prevention experts. In particular, juvenile stalking may signify youth at risk for multiple forms of violence perpetrated against multiple types of victims, not just the object of their infatuation.

It is widely accepted in the literature that stalking is a public health priority with significant social, economic, physical, and psychological consequences for the victims (Breiding et al., 2014; Dressing, Kuehner, & Gass, 2006; Owens, 2016). Perhaps the most significant of these consequences, beyond the potential for post-traumatic stress, lost days of work and income, and social isolation, is the risk of violent injury and even death (Dressing et al., 2006). Thus, this phenomenon necessitates attention by public health and prevention experts. Yet, despite a vast literature addressing problems and consequences of stalking, the majority of the research has been restricted to adults and the little research with juveniles that does exist has generally been confined to case studies, small foreign based forensic samples, and anecdotal evidence (Leitz & Theriot, 2005; Roberts, Tolou-Shams, & Madera, 2016). In fact, a pervasive trend in the literature on adolescent stalking is to note the lack of literature on adolescent stalking (e.g., Evans & Meloy, 2011; Fisher et al., 2014; Leitz & Theriot, 2005; McCann, 2000a,b; Purcell, Moller, Flower, & Mullen, 2009; Purcell, Pathe, & Mullen, 2010; Roberts et al., 2016; Vaidya, Chalhoub, & Newing, 2005). In their systematic review, Roberts et al. (2016) identified only three peer-reviewed empirical studies of stalking that reported on adolescent samples (Fisher et al., 2014; Purcell et al., 2009, 2010), two of which reported on the same sample.

Fisher et al. (2014) provide population based estimates of youth stalking perpetration in the state of Kentucky reporting that 5% of high-school students had stalked someone in the preceding year. But, the authors did not assess the risk for

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* Corresponding author. School of Social Work, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202, USA.
E-mail address: jo.smith-darden@wayne.edu (J.P. Smith-Darden).

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violence associated with stalking perpetration. Purcell et al. (2009) examined 299 cases of stalking identified from archival court records of all restraining orders applications against juveniles under 18 in the Melbourne, Australia during a three year period. Of these cases, 75% of which, involved threats against the target of observation/pursuit; 54% involved physical assaults against the target; and 1.5% involved a serious sexual assault such as rape. These data would seemingly suggest adolescent stalking perpetrators represent a significant danger to their victims. However, the prevalence of such violent youth stalkers is unknowable from this targeted method of sampling from high-risk adjudicated youth. It is difficult to truly understand risk for violent outcomes among such a skewed sample as these cases may differ in important ways from cases of adolescent stalking that do not rise to the attention of the judicial system. In fact, clinical/forensic samples of stalkers are more violent compared to stalkers sampled from the general population (Spitzberg, Cupach, & Ciceraro, 2010). Thus, these violent youth stalkers may represent a minority subset of stalkers that are violent while the vast majority of youth stalkers in the general population are nonviolent. It is unknowable from these data.

In a related vein, there is considerable debate about the definitions of stalking. Fox, Nobles, and Fisher (2011) and Owens (2016) highlight the lack of consensus about what constitutes stalking among the lay public, researchers, legislators, and practitioners. Inherent problems in the attempt to define stalking include 1) whether the presence of fear by the victim is necessary and/or sufficient, 2) how many and what different forms of behavior (e.g., threatening/intimidation, surveillance, inserting self into victim's life) must be present, and 3) how frequently the stalking behaviors must occur. Moreover, as Spitzberg (2002) notes, "the difference between stalking and mere annoyingly persistent romantic pursuit is a relatively fine line and makes the definition of stalking problematic" (p. 263). This lack of coherent definition makes it difficult to distinguish stalking and to assess rates of stalking with any consistency (Owens, 2016).

Furthermore, based on what we know from adult populations, it is at least commonly agreed that there are several broad categories of behaviors (i.e., surveillance/monitoring; invasion of personal space/property; inappropriate expression of affection, etc.) that tend to co-occur to comprise stalking (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015; Meloy, 2013; Owens, 2016; Spitzberg, 2002). However, some evidence from the adult literature suggests stalking perpetrators may not be uniform and in fact there may be latent subgroups or typologies of perpetrators based on what stalking tactics are engaged in (Björklund, Häkkänen-Nyholm, Sheridan, Roberts, & Tolvanen, 2010; Hirtenlehner, Starzer, & Weber, 2012; Häkkänen, Hagelstam, & Santtila, 2003). Identifying potential typologies of stalking perpetrators is critical because distinct stalking profiles may confer distinct consequences and risk of violence. However, included in these broadly accepted categories are intimidation/threats and aggressive behaviors (Meloy, 2013; Spitzberg, 2002). This engenders a potential problem pertaining to the lack of independence between the behaviors used to classify stalking and those that represent the potential outcomes of stalking. This essentially creates a problem of criterion contamination (Nicholls, Licht, & Pearl, 1982).

Present study

From the limited research on youth stalking, it is as of yet unclear 1) what behavioral tactics these youth tend to most commonly employ to stalk their victims, 2) if different types of youth stalkers exist based on the tactics they use, and 3) to what extent these perpetrators represent potentially violent and dangerous youth. The goals of the present research were to identify the prevalence and manner in which youth stalking perpetration exists and the extent to which it represents a risk for violence. In doing so, we sought first to identify potential latent typologies of stalking perpetrators among an adolescent sample of boys and girls. Second, we sought to determine the relation of the potential disparate typologies to 1) violence toward the victim of the stalking, and 2) general violent delinquency toward other persons. To this end, we used latent profile analysis (LPA) to identify potential latent classes (i.e., subgroups of youth). Latent profile analysis allowed us to determine if classes exist, both based on the types of the behaviors that co-occur and the frequency of the various behaviors. Moreover, this analytic strategy allows us to determine prevalence rates of disparate forms of stalking perpetration.

Stalking perpetration was measured with 14 common behavioral stalking tactics identified in prior literature (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000; Meloy, 2013; Spitzberg, 2002; Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 1998) establishing several broad domains of behavior associated with stalking. However, we purposely excluded items assessing intentionally threatening or aggressive behavior as indicators of stalking during the class enumeration process. This was done to prevent criterion contamination between indicators of class assignment and violence correlates. Instead, threatening and aggressive behaviors toward the stalking target were assessed as a distal outcome and compared by class membership.

Importantly, there is reason to suspect that the rates and tactics of stalking perpetration may differ by gender. For example, Purcell et al. (2010) found that two-thirds of the sample of perpetrators were male. Fisher et al. (2014) similarly found that significantly more males (6.5%) reported stalking perpetration relative to females (4.2%). In the sample of adjudicated youth, the motives and tactics of stalking differed by gender (Purcell et al., 2010). Specifically, girls tended to be more motivated by bullying and engage in more harassing phone calls, spreading of spiteful rumors, and enlisting others to help harass the victim compared to boys. In contrast, boys were more likely to be motivated by sexual rejection and predation and engage in property damage and surveillance/loitering (Purcell et al., 2010). Fisher et al. (2014) reported that males were more likely to show up places they were not wanted. Given these findings, we conducted the LPA separately by gender to assess the potential presence of unique classes across gender.