

# Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



Australian Government  
Australian Institute of Criminology

No. 369 March 2009

**Foreword** | *To date, research on stalking has focused almost exclusively on adults. This paper examines the nature of stalking among adolescents to determine the characteristics of stalkers and their victims and the utility of intervention orders for managing this behaviour. Its findings indicate that a majority of perpetrators are male and almost all victims know their stalker, with prior relationships including ex-school peers, family members, ex-intimate partners and former friends. Threats and physical assaults occur in a majority of these cases and the impacts of adolescent stalking mirror those reported by adult victims, with anxiety and fear both commonly occurring. However, unlike adult stalking which is usually motivated by rejection, adolescent stalking most often occurs in the context of bullying. Intervention orders were granted in almost half of the study cases. Where applications were not granted, half the victims discontinued the application prior to hearing, almost one-quarter of victims did not attend the hearing and the remainder of cases were struck out. While intervention orders are commonly used to curtail stalking, their effectiveness is yet to be established. Longitudinal research which follows youth stalking cases is needed to determine the mental health, social and vocational impacts of stalking; reasons for high rates of intervention order discontinuation by victims; rates of recidivism into adulthood and the impact of intervention orders on offenders.*

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## Adolescent stalking: offence characteristics and effectiveness of intervention orders

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Current research into stalking is limited by the almost exclusive focus on this behaviour as a form of adult-only violence. No empirical studies have systematically examined stalking among youth. Using applications for intervention orders (IO) against a defendant aged 18 years or less in the Melbourne Children's Court between January 2004 and November 2006, this study examined the nature and contexts of stalking by juveniles and the utility of IOs to manage this behaviour. Of the 906 applications during the study period, 33.1 percent (299) met the study criteria for stalking. The majority of stalkers were male (64%) and most victims female (69%). Most pursued a previously known victim (98%) and favoured direct means of contact via unwanted approaches (76%) and telephone calls or text messaging (67%). Threats (75%) and physical assaults (54%) were common. The contexts in which stalking emerged included as an extension of bullying (28%), retaliation for a perceived harm (22%), a reaction to rejection (22%) and sexual predation (5%). In 48 percent (145) of stalking cases, the IO application was granted. Nine defendants (6%) were subsequently charged with breaching an IO in the Children's Court. This study indicates that stalking by youth is characterised by direct, intense, overtly threatening, and all too often violent, forms of pursuit. The seriousness that is afforded to adult forms of stalking should similarly apply to this behaviour among youth, given the even greater potential for disruption to the victim's life and the risks of being attacked.

### Introduction

Stalking has emerged as a form of human behaviour which commands not only considerable public attention, but is increasingly attracting the interest of the police, courts and mental health professionals. Stalking occurs when one person repeatedly intrudes on another to such an extent that the recipient fears for his or her safety (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell 2009). Stalking includes a range of activities, such as seeking to coerce a former intimate into reconciliation, the persistent unwanted approaches of a would-be



suitor, or harassment by a disgruntled acquaintance or peer (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart 1999). Stalking is now proscribed as a criminal offence in most English-speaking nations, including Australia and New Zealand (Purcell, Pathé & Mullen 2004a).

The behaviours associated with stalking constitute in themselves a damaging form of abuse and include unsolicited phone calls, letters or email, intrusive approaches, following and loitering (Pathé & Mullen 1997). Associated behaviours of property vandalism, threats and physical assaults are also often encountered. Violence is strongly associated with the nature of the prior relationship with the victim, with ex-intimate partners exposed to the highest rates of threats and assault (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart 1999; Palarea, Zona, Lane & Langhinrichen-Rohling 1999). Stalking can be not only damaging to victims, but frequently associated with psychopathology in the perpetrators (Harmon, Rosner & Owens 1998; Kamphuis & Emmelkamp 2001; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart 1999; Pathé & Mullen 1997; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen 2005).

Epidemiological studies indicate that stalking affects an estimated 10 to 15 percent of Australian adults, which is consistent with the rates in the US and the UK (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 and 2005; Budd & Mattinson 2000; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes 1998). Most stalking victims are female (75%) and the majority of perpetrators are male (80%; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen 2002). Few studies have considered risk factors associated with stalking, although age and gender have emerged as significant predictors. Using data from the British Crime Survey, Budd and Mattinson (2000) found women aged 16 to 19 years reported the highest annual rates of victimisation (17%). This suggests that stalking is a significant problem for young people, particularly females.

### Stalking in youth

Studies of stalking have focused almost exclusively on adult behaviour, with research on youth confined to relatively limited case

studies (Brewster 2003). McCann (2000) published the only case series of youth stalkers, drawing on legal reports, mental health evaluations and media articles in the US to collect details on 13 cases (12 males aged nine to 18 years). These youth targeted seven adults and six peer-aged victims (including classmates, teachers and strangers) and typically confined their stalking activities to seeking physical proximity and making repeated phone calls. Eight threatened the victim and four engaged in physical violence. The primary motivation for the stalking was the desire for intimacy or sexual contact with the victim, followed by revenge and resentment. While this study provided the first indication of the nature of youth stalking, the small and selective sample prevents meaningful generalisations.

### Aims and rationale of the current study

The neglect of youth stalking is striking when one considers the crucial stage at which this behaviour occurs in the psychosocial development of the perpetrator and their victims, many of whom are likely to be children and adolescents. Ignoring youth stalking is to forego the opportunity for early intervention, which may reduce stalking recidivism and the progression to other forms of interpersonal violence (e.g. domestic violence).

This study was designed to provide the first systematic examination of the characteristics of young stalkers and their victims, the nature and contexts of stalking in this age group and the utility of intervention orders for managing this behaviour. Given the paucity of research on youth stalkers to date, this study is largely descriptive and exploratory, and therefore no specific hypotheses are advanced.

### Method

The study involved an archival search of the court records of all consecutive applications for an IO against an individual aged 18 years or less in the Melbourne Children's Court between 1 January 2004 and 30 November 2006. While stalking is a criminal offence in Victoria, only a handful of cases in the

Children's Court involve criminal charges. This reflects the policy to avoid bringing young people into the criminal justice system whenever possible. Instead, the majority of cases are managed in the civil jurisdiction via IO applications. IOs are recommended by police and court staff to victims as a 'first-line' approach in managing stalking as most anti-stalking laws require proof that the perpetrators' unwanted behaviour is intentional. The breach of an IO can provide the basis for establishing intent for future criminal prosecutions.

Information regarding the characteristics of the perpetrator and victim was extracted from each case file, along with details of the behaviour (e.g. the nature and duration of unwanted contact) and whether the IO was granted and subsequently breached. The study was conducted with the approval of local relevant ethics committees.

### Defining stalking

Stalking was defined as *multiple unwanted intrusions which persisted for a period of two weeks or more* (see Purcell, Pathé & Mullen 2004b). Given the study population, a distinction was drawn between bullying and bullying involving stalking behaviours on the basis of where the behaviours occurred. Stalking essentially involves forcing oneself on another in a context where you have no legitimate right to be (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell 2009). Intrusions that occurred entirely within the premises of a school or shared institution which both victim and perpetrator were legitimately attending were classified as bullying but not stalking. When such behaviours extended beyond the shared institution into the victim's domestic and broader social life, this was classified as stalking.

### Results

Over the study period, a total of 906 applications for an IO against a young defendant were processed in the Melbourne Children's Court. Of these, 33.1 percent (299) met the criteria for stalking. A further 48.3 percent (438) involved family violence, 15.2 percent (138) isolated threats or assault, and 3.4 percent (31) school

bullying. This report focuses on the cases of stalking.

### Youth stalking cases

The majority of perpetrators were male (64%; 191), although a significant minority were female (36%; 108). The mean age was 15.4 years (SD = 1.8; range: 9–18 years). Most were attending secondary school (79%), with eight percent attending primary school. In 41 cases, a previous IO application had been sought against the perpetrator.

The majority of victims were female (69%; 206) and the mean age was 18.8 years (SD = 11.3; range: 5–77). The majority were attending secondary (71%) or primary school (12%), with 11 percent in paid employment. In 44 percent of cases, the primary victim applied for the IO, while in the remaining cases an adult brought the application on behalf of the victim (usually a minor).

Almost all victims knew the perpetrator (98%; 293), with only two percent (6) stalked by a stranger. The prior relationship involved a current or ex-school peer in 24 percent (73) of cases, a family or peer acquaintance in 23 percent (70), an ex-intimate partner in 21 percent (62), an estranged friend in 15 percent (45) and a neighbour in 14 percent (43). In 57 percent (170) of cases, the victim and defendant were the same gender. Analysis indicated that females were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to engage

in same-gender stalking (86% vs 40%;  $\chi^2 = 58.9$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Methods and duration of stalking behaviours

Perpetrators typically subjected their victims to unwanted approaches, phone calls, text messaging and following (see Table 1). The mean number of stalking methods was 2.1 (SD = 0.96; range 1–5) and the duration ranged from 16 days to six years (median = 120 days).

The term ‘stalking by proxy’ describes activities that are perpetrated by others on the stalker’s behalf, either knowingly or unwittingly (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell 2009). In 30 percent (77) of cases, a friend or associate of the perpetrator was recruited to assist in the stalking. This tactic was utilised significantly more frequently by females compared to males (42% vs 23%;  $\chi^2 = 10.9$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Threats and assaults

Some 75 percent (239) of victims reported being threatened by the perpetrator and 15 percent (46) reported threats against a secondary target. Threats ranged from veiled to explicit threats to harm, rape or kill. Physical assaults by the defendant were reported by 54 percent (161) of victims. Cuts and bruises were common injuries from being punched, kicked and slapped, although several victims suffered more severe damage. Serious sexual assaults were disclosed by five victims.

### The impacts of stalking on victims

Victim statements provided an account of the impacts of stalking, primarily anxiety and pervasive fear that the defendant would ‘make good’ on threats. Victims subjected to stalking by peers and ex-partners attending the same school frequently indicated being unable to concentrate in class and fearing for their safety. Absenteeism and a decline in school performance were commonly reported. Severe depression or suicidal ideation was spontaneously reported in 32 cases.

### Context and motivations for the perpetrator’s behaviour

The motivation for the perpetrator’s behaviour and the context in which the stalking emerged were used to construct six categories of stalking. The motivational categories significantly differentiated both aspects of the defendants’ characteristics and their methods of stalking (see Table 2).

#### (a) Stalking as an extension of bullying

This was the most common context (28%; 84), which usually commenced in the school setting, but in all cases extended beyond the school boundaries. No clear precipitant for the behaviour could be discerned other than the perpetrator’s apparent desire to persecute and torment the victim. Victims were usually a school peer (56%) or an estranged friend (21%). Males and females were equally represented as perpetrators and victims. Same-gender stalking and stalking by proxy were most likely to occur in this context (see Table 2).

#### (b) Retaliating stalkers

Retaliation for a perceived slight or injury motivated the stalking in 22 percent (65) of cases. These cases were distinguished from bullying in that a precipitating incident or grievance could be identified in each instance. Males and females were equally represented among the perpetrators, who mainly targeted acquaintances (48%) and estranged friends (29%). The stalking consisted mainly of unwanted approaches (82%) and telephone calls (55%). Threats were common and, to a lesser extent, assaults.

**Table 1** Frequency of stalking behaviours

	%	(n)
Unwanted approaches	76	(227)
Unwanted telephone calls	42	(127)
Unwanted text messaging	15	(47)
Following	16	(48)
Cyberstalking <sup>a</sup>	11	(34)
Loitering	10	(29)
Spreading malicious gossip	7	(22)
Maintaining surveillance	2	(7)
Unwanted letters	2	(5)
Unwanted gifts/material	1	(3)
Ordering or cancelling goods	1	(3)

a: Cyberstalking included online harassment via instant messaging, email harassment and posting malicious content about the victim on websites

**Table 2** Defendant and victim characteristics and stalking behaviour according to motive

Variable	Organised bullying (n = 82)	Retaliation (n = 65)	Rejection (n = 64)	Disorganised harassment (n = 58)	Predatory (n = 16)	Infatuated (n = 6)
Gender (% male)	51%	49%	86%	67%	94%	83%
Perpetrator mean age (SD)	14.7 (2.0)	15.6 (1.5)	16.5 (1.2)	15.0 (1.5)	15.7 (1.9)	16.0 (1.9)
Victim mean age (SD)	14.8 (3.9)	19.6 (11.1)	16.2 (1.8)	28.6 (18.6)	12.5 (1.9)	16.2 (1.8)
Same gender stalking	84%	77%	3%	69%	19%	0
Stalking by proxy	42%	24%	27%	26%	20%	0
Mean (SD) stalking methods	1.9 (0.8)	2.3 (1.6)	2.3 (1.1)	1.9 (0.7)	2.0 (0.8)	3.1 (1.1)
Median (range) duration of stalking (months)	6 (1–73)	5 (1–219)	2 (1–60)	6 (0.5–60)	6 (0.5–24)	12 (2–12)
Damaged property	22%	25%	28%	52%	6%	0
Threatened victim	77%	83%	70%	79%	87%	33%
Assaulted victim	66%	46%	44%	38%	81%	17%

**(c) Rejected stalkers**

Stalking following the termination of an intimate or dating relationship occurred in 22 percent (64) of cases. This usually, but not exclusively, involved a male intruding upon a female, peer-aged victim (86% of cases). Rejected perpetrators subjected the victim to unwanted approaches at multiple venues (73%), inundated them with phone calls (66%) and made threats. Third parties were often targeted by rejected stalkers, typically the victim's parent(s) or new romantic interest.

**(d) Disorganised and disturbed stalkers**

In 20 percent (58) of cases, the perpetrator harassed a number of people at the same time, often with few (if any) links between them. Neighbours (47%) and acquaintances (22%) were the most common targets. No clear precipitant for the behaviour could be discerned, other than the defendant's frequently noted 'longstanding' conduct problems. This group constituted a mixed bag of unhappy, angry and delinquent young people. Their behaviour was largely confined to unwanted approaches (76%), threats and property damage. These perpetrators were the most likely to target adult victims (50%).

**(e) Predatory stalkers**

In five percent (16) of cases, the perpetrator's behaviour was predatory, being aimed at imposing unwanted sexual contact on the victim. All but one perpetrator was male. The target was usually a younger child (31%) or an age-peer (62%). This group limited their

behaviours to directly approaching the victim (56%) and making threats, usually to comply with their sexual demands. The rate of assault, often sexual, was higher in this group than in any other category (see Table 2).

**(f) Intimacy seeking stalkers**

Few perpetrators were motivated by the desire to establish intimacy with the victim (2%; 6). All but one perpetrator was a male pursuing a female. While small in number, this group was notable for a longer duration of pursuit than all other groups and a greater number of harassment methods, being one of the few to maintain surveillance (50%) and loiter (33%). Threats and assault were comparatively uncommon (see Table 2).

**Outcomes of intervention order applications in stalking cases**

In 48 percent (145) of cases, the IO application was granted. Of those applications not granted (52%; 154), 46 percent of victims discontinued the application prior to the court hearing, 23 percent did not attend the hearing and in 31 percent of cases, the case was struck out by the magistrate. Of the 145 applications granted, nine of the defendants (6%) were subsequently charged with breaching an IO in the Children's Court. Four breaches involved rejected stalkers and two retaliatory perpetrators. The main legal outcomes of the breaches involved a good behaviour bond (2) or probation (2).

Stalking by children and adolescents has been labelled 'relatively rare' or 'uncommon' (Scott, Ash & Elwyn 2007), despite the

absence of any prevalence studies of stalking in this age group. In this study, 33 percent of all IO applications met the study criteria for stalking. The picture of youth stalking that emerges differs to that observed in adult stalkers. In contrast to adults, who typically utilise a broad repertoire of intrusive behaviour, including covert forms of harassment such as loitering and maintaining surveillance (e.g. Harmon, Rosner & Owens 1998; Mullen, Pathé & Purcell 1999), young stalkers favour immediate and direct means of contact, mostly via unwanted approaches and phone calls or text messaging. The rates of threats (72%) and assault (51%) are notably higher than those reported in adult samples, where the overall frequency of threats range between 30 and 60 percent and assaults between 25 and 35 percent (McEwan, Mullen & Purcell 2007). The extent to which this reflects an age-crime curve, or other stalking-specific influences, warrants further attention. For example, in adult forensic samples, the lowest rate of violence is found among those who pursue strangers (McEwan, Mullen & Purcell 2007). That there were only six perpetrators in this study who pursued strangers may explain part of the relative increase in the rates of violence. Poor impulse control is also probably a greater factor, together with generally higher rates of interpersonal aggression in this age group.

Also notable among youth stalkers is a greater involvement of female perpetrators. Females were mainly encountered in the contexts of bullying and retaliation and typically focused on a victim of the same

gender. In addition, they frequently recruited others in their efforts to harass the victim. This pattern of stalking is consistent with the notion of relational aggression in which damage to a relationship (rather than physical damage) serves as the primary means of harm (Crick 1995).

The impacts of the stalking in this sample closely resemble that reported by adult victims, with anxiety and pronounced fear prominent (Kamphuis & Emmelkamp 2001; Pathé & Mullen 1997; Purcell, Pathé & Mullen 2005). Given that most victims were children and adolescents at a critical phase in their psychosocial development, the long-term effects may be even more serious than in most adult victims. This data argues not just for recognising the seriousness of youth stalking, but for establishing appropriate support and treatment services for these young and often vulnerable victims.

### **The motivations for youth stalking**

The motivations that gave rise to youth stalking differed somewhat from those seen in adults. Stalking by ex-partners was less frequent (Harmon, Rosner & Owens 1998; Meloy & Gothard 1995; Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart 1999; Palarea, Zona, Lane & Langhinrichen-Rohling 1999), though still made a substantial contribution. That youth engage in rejected patterns of stalking should not be unexpected, particularly since dating violence is one of the most common forms of violence reported by young people (e.g. Howard, Qiu & Boekeloo 2003).

Stalking as an extension of bullying was the most common context, which is not surprising. What was unexpected was the frequency of stalking related to retaliation and a non-specific pattern of disorganised harassment, usually directed at multiple targets, the latter form being rarely encountered among adults. There was an almost total absence of stalking related to attempts to impose an unwanted relationship by repeated advances, except in the context of sexual predation. Most of the cases of predatory stalking did not involve merely over-eager or insensitive approaches, but rather persistent patterns of following culminating in sexual assaults

or intimidation aimed at obtaining sexual contact. How appropriate a civil order is in such cases must be questioned.

The paucity of cases involving intimacy seeking should not be taken to suggest an absence of stalking by would-be suitors in this age group. Rather, the data here pertains to individuals who were sufficiently persistent and disturbing to bring their victims, or a parent, to take civil action. Even though relationship intrusions can involve stalking-like behaviours, they tend to be normalised and therefore are likely to evoke irritation rather than fear (Sinclair & Frieze 2005) and hence not precipitate legal intervention.

### **Utility of intervention orders to manage juvenile stalking**

While IOs are commonly utilised to curtail stalking, their effectiveness is yet to be established. Only two studies have examined breach rates among adult stalkers, ranging from 35 percent in a small Finnish sample, to 80 percent in a large Australian forensic sample (Hakkanen, Hagelstam & Santtila 2003; McKenzie 2006). The current results indicated that only six percent of youth were charged with breaching an IO during the study period. The optimism of such a low breach rate should be tempered by the finding that the majority of IO applications were not granted, predominantly due to the applicant failing to proceed with their case. This study was unable to determine why applicants discontinued or failed to appear at the court hearing, an issue that warrants further investigation (e.g. whether the applicant was fearful of proceeding, or whether the interim order was perceived as futile or effective by the time of the court hearing).

### **Study limitations**

The study data was derived from a retrospective audit of consecutive applications for an IO, rather than a prospective study of youth charged with criminal stalking. Given the study time frame, the 'opportunity' for defendants to have contravened their IO ranged from five to 39 months. A longer duration of follow-up would be advantageous, not only to analyse

charges of breaching the IO, but other criminal charges, such as stalking, uttering threats or assault. Furthermore, while the results indicate the frequency of reported breaches of an IO, this study cannot definitively address whether or not IOs are effective in managing stalking, since not all victims report breaches to police, and not all reports of breaches result in formal charges. Despite these limitations, the large sample able to be assembled in this study affords a strong degree of confidence in the representativeness of the IO applications reviewed and therefore the generalisability of the findings.

## **Conclusions**

Stalking by youth is a serious and potentially damaging form of victimisation. There is no reason why the seriousness that is afforded to adult forms of stalking should not equally apply to young people. While the impacts on the victim are cause enough for greater attention to youth stalking, the opportunity for early intervention with these perpetrators also makes this issue compelling. Intervening at the first sign of stalking behaviours offers the best chance to reduce stalking recidivism in the perpetrator. Regrettably, early intervention in juvenile justice and adolescent forensic mental health is sorely lacking, if not absent, in most countries. Reform is needed to both promote the functional recovery of young perpetrators, and to move to a more preventative approach in the management of offending. Given the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of primary crime prevention programs for young people (e.g. Mytton, DiGuseppi, Gough, Taylor & Logan 2006), identifying relevant risk factors for stalking among juveniles and developmental trajectories of this behaviour will be valuable to informing prevention programs which target those at heightened risk for stalking.

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ISSN 0817-8542 (Print)  
1836-2206 (Online)  
ISBN 978 1 921532 19 1 (Print)  
978 1 921532 20 7 (Online)

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Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government

Ethics approved no. EC/06/01  
CRC grant no. CRC 06/05-06

## Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, a number of recommendations are offered in terms of advancing further research in this area.

Based on the qualitative reports of the impacts of youth stalking in this sample, systematic research into the mental-health, social and vocational impacts of stalking in juvenile victims is required.

Given the rates of applicant withdrawal of IO applications and non-appearance, research into the reasons for applicant discontinuation is warranted, along with examination of how these factors can be addressed (e.g. the provision of court support for IO applicants in the Children's Court).

Research should also include longitudinal follow-up of samples of youth stalkers and family violence offenders in order to ascertain their rates of offending in adulthood.

Additional research is needed to compare recidivism rates among defendants who receive an IO and those who do not and the impact of legal consequences for breaching an IO (e.g. probation or a good behaviour bond) on recidivism rates.

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