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STALKING: FINDINGS FROM THE 1998 BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

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The British Crime Survey (BCS) is a regular face-to-face survey of adults living in private households in England and Wales. It measures the extent of criminal victimisation but also covers other topics. The 1998 BCS was the first 'sweep' to include a computer self-completion questionnaire which measured the extent of 'stalking'.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Using a broad definition of stalking – experience of persistent and unwanted attention – the BCS estimates that 2.9% of adults aged 16 to 59 had been stalked in the last year. This equates to almost 900,000 victims.
- ▶ An estimated 770,000 victims had been distressed or upset by their experience and 550,000 victims had been subjected to violence, threatened with violence, or had been fearful that violence would be used.
- ▶ Women (4.0%) were more likely to have experienced persistent and unwanted attention than men (1.7%). Risks were particularly high for young women aged between 16 and 19 (16.8%).
- ▶ About a third of incidents were perpetrated by someone who was in an intimate relationship with the victim at the start of the episode of persistent and unwanted attention, or who was a former intimate. A further third involved an acquaintance of the victim. Only a third of incidents involved strangers.
- ▶ Victims of persistent and unwanted attention experienced a range of different types of behaviour. The most common experiences were being forced to talk to the offender, silent phone calls, being physically intimidated and being followed. A quarter of men and a fifth of women said the offender had used physical force.
- ▶ Seven in ten victims said they had changed their lifestyle as a result of their experience. Women were more likely to have done so than men.
- ▶ Overall, a third of victims said the police had been made aware of the matter. In 35% of these cases the victim was dissatisfied with the police response.

The 1998 BCS included a computerised self-completion questionnaire designed to provide the first reliable measure of the extent of 'stalking' in England and Wales. A nationally representative sample of 9,988 16- to 59-year-olds were asked whether they had been subject to 'persistent and unwanted attention' during their lifetime and during the preceding year. Those who had been subject to such attention were asked about their experience.

Measures of the extent of stalking will inevitably be affected by how it is defined. The term 'stalking' has

no legal status in England and Wales. The 1997 Protection from Harassment Act does not use or define the term, although it created two specific offences to enable the criminal justice system to deal more effectively with 'stalking' cases:

- the summary offence of harassment
- the triable-either-way offence of putting people in fear of violence.

See Harris (2000) for an evaluation of the effectiveness of legislation.

Table 1 Prevalence of stalking in last year and estimated number of victims

	Women	Men	All
Percentage victims in the last year			
Any persistent and unwanted attention	4.0%	1.7%	2.9%
Distress or upset caused	3.7%	1.3%	2.6%
Fear of violence	2.7%	0.9%	1.9%
Best estimate of number of victims in the last year			
Any persistent and unwanted attention	610,000	270,000	880,000
Distress or upset caused	570,000	200,000	770,000
Fear of violence	410,000	140,000	550,000

Note: Source: 1998 BCS and ONS mid-1998 population estimates.
 Distress or upset are those incidents in which the victim was 'very, fairly or a little distressed'.
 Fear of violence are those incidents in which the victim was threatened with violence, violence was used or the victim was 'very, fairly or a little' afraid violence would be used.

THE EXTENT OF STALKING

The BCS questionnaire was deliberately designed to capture a wide range of incidents that could potentially be considered as incidents of stalking. Using the relatively broad definition of 'persistent and unwanted attention', the 1998 BCS estimates that:

- 11.8% of adults aged 16 to 59 had been stalked some time in their lives (since the age of 16)
- 2.9% of adults had been stalked in the last year. This equates to a total of almost 900,000 victims – 610,000 women and 270,000 men (see Table 1).

Alternative last year estimates based on definitions that are close to the two offences created by the Protection from Harassment Act (see above) can also be derived from the BCS. These are also given in Table 1.

The remainder of this Research Findings presents figures based on the broader definition of persistent and unwanted attention.

THE VICTIMS

The risk of being subject to persistent and unwanted attention varies across different socio-demographic groups. Regardless of the social characteristic under consideration, women were invariably more at risk than men. 4.0% of women said they had experienced persistent and unwanted attention in the last year compared with 1.7% of men. Risks were particularly high among young women – 16.8% of women aged 16 to 19 and 7.8% aged 20 to 24 said they had been stalked.

Risks were also high among the following groups of women – those who were:

- students (12.4%)
- single (9.8%)
- living in privately rented accommodation (7.4%)
- living in a flat or maisonette (6.6%)
- living in a household with an annual income of less than £15,000 (5.3%).

Many of these risk factors will overlap to some degree (for example, students are usually young and single) and it is difficult to assess the unique contribution of each.

THE OFFENDERS

The 1,262 respondents who recalled at least one episode of persistent and unwanted attention at some time since the age of 16 were asked about the most recent episode. This included 313 cases where an episode had taken place in the last year.

The majority (79%) of incidents involved one person acting alone. The pattern was different for men, where 66% of incidents involved a single offender compared with 84% for women. A fifth (20%) of incidents against men involved three or more offenders.

Age and sex of offenders

Overall, 81% of incidents were perpetrated by men, with a half being committed by men aged between 20 and 39 years of age. Male offenders were involved in 90% of incidents against women and 57% of incidents against men. Incidents against men were also more likely to involve young offenders. Just over a third were committed by someone under 20, compared with less than a fifth of incidents against women.

The relationship between offender and victim

In 29% of incidents the perpetrator was an intimate or former intimate (defined as spouse, partner, boyfriend/girlfriend or date) of the victim. Although stalking is popularly seen as the act of an obsessive or psychotic stranger, only a third (34%) of incidents were committed by someone unknown to the victim (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Offender's relationship to the victim

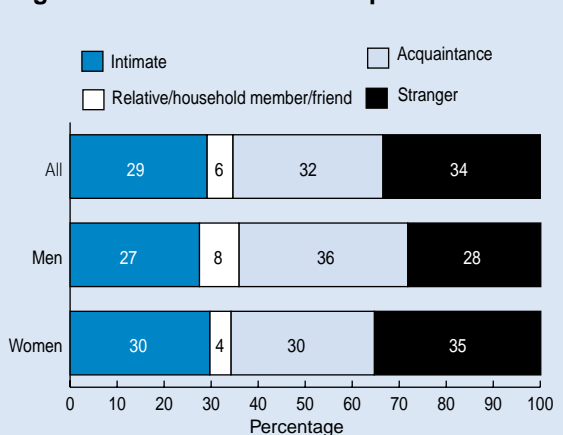
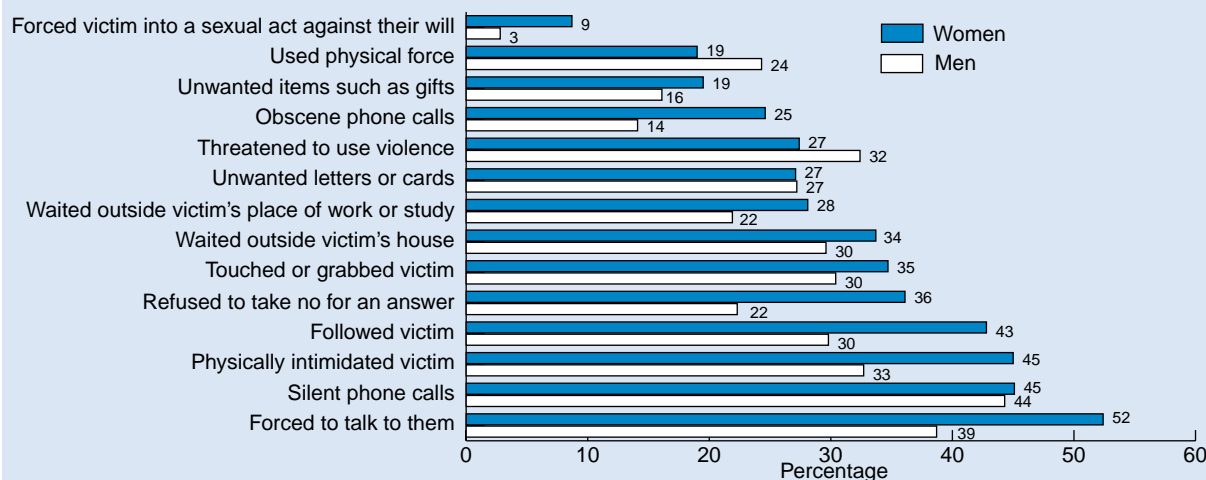


Figure 2 Types of persistent and unwanted behaviour experienced, by sex



The remaining incidents involved close friends, relatives or other household members and acquaintances, including colleagues at work or members of the public contacted through work. Women were significantly more likely to have been victims of strangers than men.

Reasons for stalking

Victims of persistent and unwanted attention were asked why they thought the perpetrator paid them such attention. The most common reasons given were the offender wanted to:

- start a relationship (22%)
- annoy or upset the victim (16%)
- continue a relationship (12%).

Women were more likely than men to say the offender wanted to start or continue a relationship. Among men, the most common reason was that the offender wanted to annoy or upset them.

EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT OF STALKING

In about a third of cases reported to the survey, the stalking behaviour lasted less than a month, and in a further quarter (26%) between one and three months. However, for around one in five victims (19%) it had lasted for a year or more. There were few differences between male and female victims.

Experiences of persistent and unwanted attention were wide ranging but the most common experience was being forced into talking to the offender – 49% of all episodes involved this type of behaviour. Other relatively common experiences, reported in a third or more of episodes, were:

- silent phone calls (45%)
- being physically intimidated – such as the perpetrator getting too close (42%)
- being followed (39%)
- being touched or grabbed (34%)
- the offender waiting outside the victim's home (33%).

Women were more likely to experience almost all of the types of stalking behaviour asked about. Men were more likely to report that the offender had threatened to use, or actually used, force or violence (see Figure 2).

Previous research has indicated that many stalking victims are subjected to a range of different types of stalking behaviour. The BCS findings confirm this – 78% of victims had experienced more than one

type of behaviour during their most recent episode. About half had been subjected to between two and five distinct types of stalking behaviour and a further third to six or more.

Women tended to experience more types of behaviour than men – 33% of women reported experiencing six or more distinct types of behaviour, compared with 25% of men.

Impact on the victim

92% of victims said they were annoyed or irritated by the experience (70% 'very' and 21% 'fairly'). Three-quarters had found the experience distressing or upsetting (50% 'very' and 24% 'fairly'). Women were particularly likely to have been 'very' distressed or upset (57% of women compared with 32% of men).

Stalking can also affect the victim's general lifestyle. 71% said they had changed their behaviour in at least one of three ways because of their experiences:

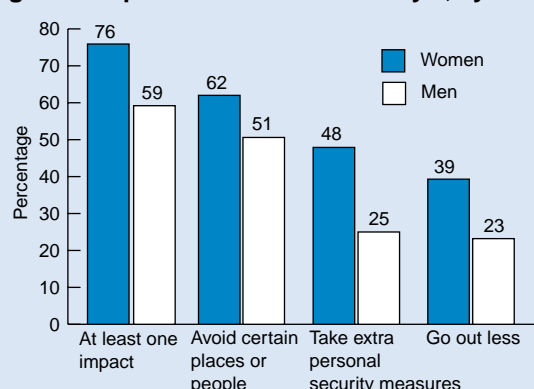
- 59% avoided certain places or people
- 35% went out less than before
- 42% started taking additional personal security measures.

Women were more likely to have changed their lifestyle than men (see Figure 3). 76% of women said they had changed their behaviour in at least one way, compared with 59% of men.

Victims were most likely to be affected, both emotionally and in terms of changing their behaviour, if they had been subjected to:

- a sexual assault
- violence or the threat of violence
- obscene phone calls.

Figure 3 Impact on the victim's lifestyle, by sex



WAS IT A CRIME?

One-third of victims (33%) considered what had happened to them to be a crime. A further 37% thought it was 'wrong but not a crime'. A quarter considered it to be 'just something that happens'. These results should not be taken as evidence that many incidents are trivial and outside the scope of the criminal justice system. Victims' perceptions of whether incidents are 'crimes' will be influenced by their knowledge of the criminal justice system and their own subjective value judgements as to what constitutes a 'crime'. Harris (2000) found that many victims did not realise that the behaviour they were subjected to might be an offence.

SEEKING HELP

Overall, a third of victims said the police had been made aware of the persistent and unwanted attention. The figure was 56% where the victim considered what had happened to them to be a crime, 24% where they thought it was 'wrong but not a crime' and 18% where they felt it was 'just something that happens'. Victims who do not consider their experience to be a crime may report it because they fear the behaviour could escalate further or because they want general advice from the police about the matter.

Those who had been in contact with the police were not necessarily satisfied with the response they received. 35% said they were 'a bit' or 'very' dissatisfied (61% were satisfied). Victims may also turn to others for help, advice or support:

- 72% had told a friend, relative or neighbour
- 55% told a partner, boyfriend or girlfriend
- 8% told a doctor, social worker or carer.

Overall, women are more likely to confide in someone (including the police) than men. 85% of

women had told someone about their experience, compared with 73% of men.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the 1998 BCS suggest that the problem of stalking is not widespread, with 2.9% of all adults aged 16 to 59 experiencing persistent and unwanted attention in the previous year. However, this does equate to almost 900,000 victims who could potentially require recourse to the criminal justice system or other services. Furthermore, risks are worryingly high among certain groups – particularly young women.

The low level of reporting among victims, even among those subjected to more serious incidents, and the level of dissatisfaction with the police response among those who did report, gives some cause for concern. The BCS does not provide information about the source of victim dissatisfaction. Harris (2000) reported that victims had found difficulties when the police officer they had been dealing with was off duty and had also felt they required more support through the court process.

Since this research, new guidance (Brown, 2000) has been released for police officers dealing with cases of harassment or stalking. It also provides advice to victims. This may encourage the reporting of incidents to the police and improve the way in which the police deal with such incidents. The role of Victim Support and the Witness Service in providing support and advice to stalking victims also requires further consideration.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The 1998 British Crime Survey had a nationally representative sample of 14,947 people aged 16 and above living in private households in England and Wales. The response rates was 79%. 9,988 respondents aged 16 to 59 completed a self-completion module on stalking at the end of the face-to-face interview (97% of the eligible sample of all 16- to 59- year-olds interviewed). 1,262 respondents said they had been subject to persistent and unwanted attention at some time in their life. The self-completion was conducted using Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (CASI). Fieldwork was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research between January and June 1998.

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Brown, H. (2000) *Stalking and other forms of harassment: An investigators guide*. Police Research Award Scheme.

Harris, J. (2000). *An evaluation of the use and effectiveness of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997*. Home Office Research Study No. 203. London: Home Office.

For a more detailed report, see *The extent and nature of stalking: findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey* by Tracey Budd and Joanna Mattinson (2000). Home Office Research Study No. 210. London: Home Office.

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