



Spanish Journal of Legal Medicine

Revista Española de Medicina Legal

www.elsevier.es/mlegal



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Formal coping strategies for victims of stalking: Factors associated with reporting to the police[☆]



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Received 21 January 2021; accepted 16 February 2021

Available online 24 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Stalking;
Victimization;
Police;
Coping strategies

Abstract

Introduction: The rate of reporting the crime of stalking to the police in Spain is low. The present study aims to determine the factors that influence the decision to report the victimizing event to the police, as well as the reasons for non-reporting.

Methods: A total of 1773 Spanish university students (71.9% female and 27.4% male; mean age 21.35 years; SD = 4.493) completed a stalking victimization survey to determine the prevalence rate of stalking victimization, the severity of the behaviour and the likelihood of reporting.

Results: 638 students (35.6%) reported having been victims of stalking at some time in their lives (79.5% female, mean age = 21.85, SD = 5.340). Only 35 victims (5.5%) reported the incident to the police. Being a woman, receiving threats of harm to third parties, as well as direct threats were the variables most related to reporting the situation. Of the victims who did not report the events (386), more than half considered that the situation was not important enough to report to the police.

Conclusions: Stalking is a prevalent phenomenon, however, the rate of reporting to the police is low. The severity of the behaviours experienced increases the likelihood of reporting. Therefore, it is necessary to raise awareness of the phenomenon of stalking to prevent serious behaviours and enhance the visibility of this crime.

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DOI of original article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.reml.2021.02.003>

[☆] Please cite this article as: Fernández-Cruz V. Estrategias de afrontamiento formales en victimización por *stalking*: factores asociados a la denuncia policial. Rev Esp Med Legal. 2021;47:136–142.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Stalking;
Victimización;
Policía;
Estrategias de
enfrentamiento

Estrategias de afrontamiento formales en victimización por *stalking*: factores asociados a la denuncia policial**Resumen**

Introducción: La tasa de denuncia policial del delito de acecho en España es baja. El presente trabajo pretende conocer qué factores influyen en la decisión de denunciar el hecho victimizante a instancias policiales, así como conocer los motivos de no denuncia.

Material y métodos: Un total de 1.773 estudiantes universitarios españoles (71,9% mujeres y 27,4% hombres; media de edad 21,35 años; DS=4,493) cumplimentaron una encuesta de victimización de conductas de acecho con el objetivo de conocer la tasa de prevalencia de victimización por acecho, la gravedad del comportamiento y probabilidad de denuncia.

Resultados: Seiscientos treinta y ocho estudiantes (35,6%) indicaron haber sido víctimas de acecho alguna vez en su vida (79,5% mujeres, media de edad = 21,85; DS = 5,340). Únicamente 35 víctimas (5,5%) denunció los hechos a la policía. El hecho de ser mujer, recibir amenazas con dañar a terceros, así como amenazas directas fueron las variables que más relación guardaban con denunciar la situación. En relación con aquellas víctimas que no denunciaron los hechos (386) más de la mitad lo justifican por pensar que la situación no era lo suficientemente importante como para poner en conocimiento a la policía.

Conclusiones: El acecho es un fenómeno prevalente, no obstante, la tasa de denuncia a instancias policiales es baja. La gravedad de las conductas experimentadas incrementa la probabilidad de denuncia. En este sentido, es necesaria una concienciación previa sobre el fenómeno del acecho, para prevenir conductas graves y potenciar la visibilidad de este delito.

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Introduction

It is estimated that in Spain approximately three million women have been subjected to stalking at some time in their life¹. After the reform introduced by Organic Law 1/2015, of 30 March², which passed the inclusion of article 172 of the penal code, the number of cases reported to the police and subsequently to the Courts has considerably increased³.

The conceptual and phenomenological analysis of stalking is complex, and it is widely debated⁴. One of the definitions quoted the most often in the field of criminology is the one suggested by Tajden and Thoennes⁵, who undertook the first research in the world into the phenomenon of stalking. These authors define the concept as a "form of behaviour aimed at a specific person, which involves repeated visual or physical proximity, non-consensual communication or verbal, written or implicit threats, or a combination of these, that would terrorise a reasonable person, where repetition implies two or more occasions" (p.2). We can therefore observe two elements that characterise phenomena of this type. First, we are talking about a set of behaviours which take place at different times and at long intervals. We may be describing a single type of behaviour which is repeated, or different types of behaviour performed on more than one occasion⁶. These behaviours, when they are analysed without any previous context, may not seem to be injurious or dangerous *per se*. Nevertheless, the fact that they are carried out repeatedly and without the consent of the victim means that they cause discomfort, and may produce severe psychological consequences in the victim^{7,8}. The second characteristic element

in stalking behaviour is precisely the discomfort or negative consequences which it may cause in the victim. In Spain, victims have to accredit severe alteration in their everyday life as the result of such victimisation².

The few data that are available for Spain indicate that the prevalence of stalking in the general population stands at around 11%–15.2%^{1,9}. However, these data should be analysed with caution, given that they solely cover samples composed of women. This is because studies have focussed on preventing and combating gender-based violence. Notwithstanding this, such an approach is justified because young women aged from 18 to 24 years are more likely to suffer victimisation of this type than men, who are far more likely to act as stalkers^{10–12}.

Several studies have underlined the emotional, psychological, economic and even physical consequences for those who are subjected to stalking as a result of this victimisation^{6,13–15}. The way the situation is managed and the coping strategies used to combat the process of victimisation differ from one individual to another, and they may depend on several variables. These variables may include sex, age, the existence of a previous relationship between the victim and the victimiser, the type of stalking behaviour or the duration of the victimisation^{8,16}. The scope of the study of victimisation due to stalking may therefore be differentiated in terms of the difference between informal and formal coping strategies. The former consist of those strategies in which the victim seeks support in their closest circle, or is able to overcome the situation alone¹⁷. On the other hand, formal strategies are those in which the individual seeks the help of a professional who specialises in supplying

help, such as the police¹⁸. It is estimated that only from 20% to 30% of victims eventually report the situation¹⁷⁻²⁰.

Recent studies have shown that certain factors would increase the probability that the victims of stalking will report the situation to the police. Firstly, we identify the severity of stalking behaviours. That is, the more harmful and present the behaviours which the victim experiences, such as a wide and varied range of behaviours, behaviours that involve increased physical proximity, duration over time or the existence of harmful behaviour (threats, threats against third parties, damage to property, etc.), this increases the probability of reporting^{17,18,20,21}. Another factor which may influence reporting of the victimisation to the police is the existence of a previous relationship between the victim and the stalker. The results here are inconclusive, as some studies indicate that the probability of reporting increases when a previous relationship has existed²⁰ while others indicate the contrary^{5,17,21}. Lastly, it is necessary to underline the reasons why victims do not report the situation of victimisation, as in the majority of cases of stalking (70%–80%) the police are not informed. The reasons for this include the consideration that the situation can be resolved personally, or that it is not important or that the police will not be able to do anything to help the victim, or that they will not be believed^{5,9,10,22}.

In the light of the data analysed, and given that the crime of stalking is a phenomenon that has hardly been studied in our context, and that the existing results are inconclusive, this study aims to analyse the factors which influence reporting the incident to the police. It also examines the factors which lead victims not to report the facts, as this question is fundamental to improve intervention and the protection of these victims.

Material and method

Design

To study and analyse the situation of victimisation due to stalking in the Spanish population of university students, the Spanish version of the Supplementary Survey on Victimisation of the National Crime Victimisation Survey in the U.S.A. was used²². This survey includes a first block of questions on socio-demographic information (8 questions) and a second block containing questions on victimisation (35 questions).

Sample

A total of 1773 students took part in the study, 1274 women (71.9%) and 486 men (27.4%), aged from 18 to 64 years old ($SD = 4.493$). For this study, only those who indicated having experienced one of the following stalking behaviours more than once were taken into account: a) receiving unwanted calls or unwanted messages, b) receiving letters, e-mails or any other type of unwanted correspondence, c) having been followed or spied on, d) for somebody to have waited for them within or outside premises, such as their home, the university, workplace or training facility, e) appearing in places where they were unexpected, f) sending gifts, flowers or unwanted items, or g) the publication of information or spreading rumours in Internet, in public places or

word-of-mouth. It should be pointed out that, in connection with stalking behaviours, to optimise the statistical analysis two new variables were created to differentiate two types of stalking behaviour: stalking with the aim of seeking proximity, or stalking with the purpose of watching¹⁸.

Procedure

This study was approved on 6 February 2018 by the Research Ethics Committee (CER) of the *Universitat Internacional de Catalunya* (UIC Barcelona). During the last week of February 2018, an email was sent to several degree coordinators in public and private Spanish Universities. It contained information on the research and a link to send students together with the survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed that the survey would take approximately 20–25 min. The email address of the researchers was shown in the questionnaire, so that those who wanted additional information could ask for it. It should be pointed out that the sample analysed is not representative of the population studied. The data obtained were analysed using version 26 of the SPSS® statistical package.

Statistical analysis

A statistical analysis was first undertaken of all of the variables analysed in the study. The sample was then divided into victims who reported to the police ($n = 35$) and victims who did not report to the police ($n = 386$). The two groups were compared using Chi-squared (χ^2) and differences between averages. Logistical regression analysis was then performed on the comparison variables, and the dependent variable consisted of the fact of reporting to the police. The level of statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$. All of the variables analysed were dichotomous.

Finally, descriptive information is supplied on the experience of reporting the facts to the police, and the reasons for not doing so.

Results

Difference between victims who reported to the police and those who did not do so

Six hundred and thirty-eight students (35.6%) stated that they had been victims of stalking. Their average age was 21.85 years ($SD = 5.340$). The majority were women (79.5%). In 63.9% of cases the victim knew their stalker. Approximately one of every ten victims stated that the unwanted behaviour or contacts persisted at the time of answering the survey. Only 5.5% of the victims went to the police to report the facts. It should be pointed out that, of the total number of victims in the study, 217 (34%) did not answer the questions on making a report to the police.

Table 1 shows the results of the comparison of averages between the victims who reported the facts to the police and those who did not. The data show that 35 of the 638 stalking victims (5.5%) reported the facts to the police. The women experienced the most situations of stalking (79.5%), regardless of whether they reported it to the police or not,

Table 1 Difference in average between victims who reported stalking and those who did not.

	Reported to the police (n = 35)			Did not report to the police (n = 386)		
	n	Average	SD	n	Average	SD
Sex	35	0.97**	0.169	380	0.79	0.408
Age	34	0.68	0.475	376	0.78	0.413
Relationship with stalker	32	0.69	0.471	337	0.73	0.446
Stalking by approach	35	0.63	0.490	386	0.50	0.501
Stalking by watching	35	0.86	0.355	386	0.86	0.350
Days	29	0.38**	0.493	314	0.18	0.386
Weeks	29	0.10	0.309	314	0.13	0.340
Months	29	0.13	0.350	314	0.14	0.357
Years	29	0.06	0.257	314	0.14	0.357
Harm to property	35	0.23*	0.426	378	0.06	0.234
Harm to third parties	34	0.35*	0.485	371	0.11	0.311
Threats of personal harm	35	0.54***	0.505	386	0.33	0.470
Severe victimisation	30	0.37***	0.490	364	0.20	0.401

SD: standard deviation.

* $P < 0.001$.** $P < 0.01$.*** $P < 0.05$.

and they were also more likely to do so in comparison with the men ($t [421] = 2.614$; $P = 0.009$). The youngest individuals were at the highest risk of victimisation (74.9%) for whom stalking took place by individuals known to them (56%). Respecting the type of stalking, we found that behaviours which involved watching were reported the most often by the victims (86.1%).

It was found that the victims who reported to the police were those who had suffered stalking lasting for days (31.4%) and that they were more likely to do so than those whose stalking had lasted for months or years ($t [421] = 2.573$; $P = 0.010$). Finally, it can be seen that as the stalking situation worsens, the percentage of victims who decide to go to the police and report it increases. Significant differences were therefore observed respecting damage to property ($t [421] = 3.770$; $P = 0.000$), that the stalker had threatened or attacked persons known to the victim ($t [421] = 4.166$; $P = 0.000$), victims who had reported threats of direct attacks ($t [421] = 2.559$; $P = 0.011$) and victims who reported severe victimisation ($t [421] = 2.627$; $P = 0.15$).

Logistic regression was then performed to estimate the relationship between the independent variables analysed in the study and the fact of reporting to the police (Table 2). Three of the thirteen variables that were taken into account were found to be significant: being a woman led to a 700% increase in the probability of reporting the facts to the police. The victims who admitted that the stalker had threatened to harm third parties were 348% more likely to report the facts to the police, and the victims who stated that they had received threatened or attempted physical attack were approximately 200% more likely to do so.

Contact with the police

When the process of reporting to the police by those victims who decided to do so is analysed in detail, we found that in 45.7% of cases the victim had previously asked for help from a

family member, friend or acquaintance in making the report. In 40% of cases it was the victim herself who independently went to report the facts. Once the report had been made, in 37.1% of cases the victims stated that the police accepted the report, although only 8.6% of the crimes terminated in the courts or in the public prosecutor's office. In 28.6% of cases the victims stated that after they had reported the facts, the police asked for more information. Nevertheless, none of the victims stated that the situation worsened after contacting the police, and on the contrary approximately six of every ten victims stated that the situation improved.

Lastly, it is necessary to analyse the reasons why victims did not report the facts to the police. We found that in 61% of cases the victims considered the situation to be unimportant, and that this was therefore it was not necessary to report it. Another outstanding finding is that half of the victims (51.6%) believed that the stalking could be resolved by other means, as it took place in the personal field and could be resolved without the need to go to the police.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse the differences between stalking victims who reported this to the police and those who did not, and to gain an understanding of why it was not reported. It is first necessary to point out that the results have confirmed that stalking is a common phenomenon in our context, and that the rate of prevalence in the population of Spanish university students is high and consistent with the findings of similar studies²⁰. The results show that approximately three of every ten students (35.6%) state that at some time in their life they have suffered unwanted behaviour that was repeated more than once. It was also confirmed that young women are at higher risk of victimisation in comparison with men, as well as the fact that the existence of a tie between the victim and victimiser is one of the characteristics of the stalking phenomenon^{9,20}.

Table 2 Logistical regression for reporting to police with study variables.

Variables	Model 1		Reported to police	
	B	SE	Wald	Exp (B)
Woman	2.129	1.063	4.012	8.407*
18–22 years	–0.380	0.579	0.431	0.684
Relationship with stalker	–0.003	0.547	0.000	0.997
Stalking by approach	–0.199	0.519	0.146	0.820
Stalking by watching	0.188	0.761	0.061	1.207
Days	0.876	0.640	1.873	2.400
Weeks	0.493	0.895	0.303	1.637
Months	0.987	0.725	1.855	2.684
Years	–0.600	0.956	0.394	0.549
Harm to property	–0.348	0.862	0.163	0.706
Harm to third parties	1.500	0.585	6.573	4.480**
Threats of personal harm	1.203	0.569	4.465	3.329*
Severe victimisation	–0.042	0.612	0.005	0.959
Constant	–5.183	1.458	12.633	0.006***
Model X ²	24.018*			

* $P < 0.05$.** $P < 0.01$.*** $P < 0.001$.

Respecting reporting the facts to the police, the results of this study indicate that only 5.5% of the victims in the sample did so. This is a low figure in comparison with other similar studies in this field, which show a reporting rate of 20%^{19,20}. A possible explanation of this fact may be the type of sample analysed in the different studies, as well as the means by which formal reporting was measured. The type of sample may influence what is known about stalking behaviours. Thus those studies²⁰ which interviewed students of law and criminology may show greater knowledge of criminal behaviours, the legal process and existing channels for reporting. Moreover, the way in which formal reporting is measured may also influence the rate of prevalence, given that reports to other types of professional may be included, such as superiors, teachers or bosses¹⁹. It is therefore necessary to define and specify a more or less common denotation within the field of criminology to thereby facilitate comparison of the results of different studies. Regardless, of the foregoing point, we found a low percentage of reporting, so that it is necessary to consider implementing preventing programs to raise awareness in the university context, to raise the profile of phenomena of this type and supply young people with tools so that they can denounce such victimisation.

Another datum which agrees with the international literature on stalking is the high percentage of victims who do not report it. Several reasons may explain this fact. Firstly, a tie may exist between the victim and victimiser. Studies have shown that a previous romantic attachment between both parties makes reporting less likely²², which may be because the victim is afraid of reprisals, or because they may feel an emotional attachment to the stalker. Another possible explanation is that a victim may not be aware that such behaviour is a crime, so they do not consider reporting it²³. Stalking is a new crime in our country and there is little legal experience with it³. As we saw, in 61.7% of cases the victims considered that the stalking was not important enough to

be reported, as they may not be aware that it is a crime. Finally, the fact that victims do not consider going to the police may be due to their lack of trust in this institution. For example, a qualitative study in which stalking victims were interviewed and their reasons for not reporting it to the legal system were analysed, concluded that lack of trust in legal institutions, as well as fear of being victimised for a second time by the system itself, hindered and prevented reporting²⁴. It is therefore considered to be fundamental for professionals who work in the field of prevention and who communicate with stalking victims to be trained, so that victims' perceptions change and they are able to trust the legal system and the police.

Respecting the variables associated with increased probability of reporting, the results of this study have shown that the severity of stalking behaviours and an increase in the threats and violence associated with stalking were more present in those cases where the victim reported the facts. Direct threats, severe victimisation, damage to property and threats to harm individuals close to the victim were more significant for the victims who reported the facts to the police than they were for those who did not. This is confirmed by the results of other similar studies^{17,21}, where behaviours of this type increased awareness of the victimising situation. This awareness increased the probability that the victims would report to the police, as the harm done more evident. This argument would also justify the fact that the victims stalked for days reported this more than those who suffered it during months or years. As these forms of behaviour are more serious, it is more probable that they will be reported earlier. However, it should be pointed out that these results may not be representative, due to the small number of victims who reported the facts to the police and were analysed in this study.

The results of this study also show the importance of poly-victimisation in the study of stalking behaviours. Although

this variable is unrelated to whether incidents are reported to the police, questions that deserve special attention may be deduced from the data shown. Firstly, 13.2% of the sample stated that they had suffered another type of harm. This datum is alarming, as it shows there is a group of victims who have been victimised in multiple ways. These findings were observed in other studies in this field, as stalking was found to be associated with other forms of violence in relationships. These include sexual violence and may even result in death^{5,16}. Future studies in this area should analyse how stalking is associated with other more severe forms of online and offline victimisation²⁵, analysing the dynamic of these behaviours and detecting when one follows another. In this way, knowledge of the dynamic of poly-victimisation would allow us to guide and implement preventive programs in an optimum way.

Limitations

Finally, it is necessary to underline the limitations of this study. Firstly, the results obtained by this work cannot be extrapolated to the whole population, as the sample analysed was restricted to university students. Although the literature states that the prevalence of stalking behaviours increases in this group, future research should centre on the general population.

Secondly, it is necessary to indicate that there is a bias respecting the gender of the sample that was analysed, as 71% of the students who took part in the study were women.

Lastly, the low total number of victims who reported the incidents to the police means that the sample is small (n=35) so that the data should be analysed with care. Likewise, of the total number of students who answered affirmatively that they had been subjected to stalking at some time in their life, 34% did not answer the questions on reporting to the police. Nevertheless, the results of this study help of increase knowledge in the field of stalking, which is still lacking within our context.

Conflict of interests

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

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