

Stalking in Later Life

Introduction

Almost 30% of all stalking victims are aged 50 or older¹, but media and pop culture depictions of this crime would lead one to believe that its victims are primarily young. A study reviewing data from the National Violence Against Women Survey found that **older adults were almost as likely as younger people to be stalked**². The study also found that women age 55 and older are more likely than men of the same age to be stalked. Most often the stalker is someone known to the victim and often stalking occurs as part of domestic violence in later life³.

Many victims who are older or have a disability may not be believed if they report stalking, particularly if the victim has dementia or psychiatric disabilities. Others may not be believed because of the frailty or disability of the stalker. By educating ourselves about the prevalence and dynamics of stalking among victims over 50, people who work with older survivors can more quickly and effectively identify or develop resources and services to meet older victims' unique needs.

What is stalking?

Stalking is a pattern of repeated, unwanted attention, harassment, and contact directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear for their safety or the safety of others or suffer substantial emotional distress.



Who are the perpetrators of stalking?

- Current or former intimate partners
- Family members
- Non-relative caregivers
- Acquaintances
- Strangers

Stalkers may or may not have prior criminal records and rarely have a mental illness. There is no one psychological or behavioral profile for stalkers.



What are common stalking tactics?

- Following a person on foot or in a vehicle
- Appearing at a person's home, business, or other places the victim normally frequents (such as senior centers, places of worship, or medical offices)
- Using the internet, tracking software, or other electronic devices to monitor or contact a victim
- Making harassing or repeated phone calls or text messages
- Leaving written notes, phone messages, or e-mails
- Repeatedly sending unwanted gifts (such as flowers) to the victim
- Obtaining personal information about the victim without the victim's permission
- Vandalizing the victim's property (disabling security systems, unscrewing outside lights, disabling vehicles)
- Filing change of address forms at the post office in the victim's name in order to intercept mail



How does stalking impact its victims?

Stalking may affect every part of a victim's life. Many victims talk about the strain of constantly being on alert for the stalker or the next incident.

Other victim reactions may include:

- Fear of what the stalker will do
- Feeling vulnerable and unsafe
- Not knowing whom to trust
- Stress, nervousness, anxiety, depression
- Eating and sleeping issues
- Hyper-vigilance
- Frustration or isolation because others do not understand why they are afraid



What is challenging about cases of stalking in later life?

Stalking is difficult to recognize, investigate, assess, and prevent for many reasons including the following:

- Stalking is not a single, easily identifiable criminal act like assault, robbery, burglary, and other crimes. Stalking is often a mix of criminal and non-criminal behavior.
- Many victims, particularly those who are being stalked via internet-based or electronic surveillance, may not be aware that they are being stalked, or may be unfamiliar with the technology being used to surveil them.
- The impact of stalking on the victim – the fear it causes – is a key component of its legal definition. This affects the way the crime must be investigated and proven.
- In the context of domestic violence, investigation of stalking incidents may seem insignificant when physical violence is occurring.
- Stalking may be seen as something that only happens to younger individuals. Therefore, older victims may not be believed and professionals may believe the victims are overreacting or have dementia or mental illness rather than that they are being stalked.
- The stalker may commit criminal acts in different locations and may be under investigation in multiple jurisdictions.

How can I support an older adult who is being stalked?

- As with other forms of abuse, start by believing what the victim tells you about their experience. Remind them that it is not their fault, and that they deserve to be safe.
- Be aware that they may not use the word “stalking” but may instead talk about someone “bugging,” “bothering,” or “harassing” them.
- Understand the reasons that older victims of stalking may be unable to leave or disengage from the abuser.
- Remember that stalkers often choose victims intentionally based on their perceived or actual vulnerabilities.
- [Conduct the SHARP risk assessment with stalking victims](#) and [safety plan specifically for stalking behaviors](#).
- Most older adults use technology; [learn more about tech safety and older adults here](#).
- Advise victims to document every incident with [an incident/documentation log](#).

What resources are available to someone who is being stalked, or to someone who wants to learn more about this issue?

- [Stalking Prevention and Awareness Resource Center](#)
- [National Network on Domestic Violence Technology Safety Project](#)
- [NCALL Tech Safety + Older Adults Toolkit](#)
- [Victim Connect Resource Center](#)

Citations

- 1 Truman, J.L., & Morgan, R.E. (2021). Stalking Victimization, 2016. Washington, DC: US DOJ, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report.
- 2 US Department of Justice, “Stalking in America: findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey” (1998). National Institute of Justice Research in Brief. 45.
- 3 A Smith, S.G., Basile, K.C., & Kresnow, M. (2022). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2016/2017 Report on Stalking. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease control and Prevention.



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