

MODEL LITERATURE REVIEW E

The Prevalence of Stalking Among College Students¹

Stalking Vignette

Heather's class ended, and she left the classroom. She noticed Tom hanging around outside the door again. She wished there was another way out. He approached, said hello, and began walking with her. Heather was uncomfortable with Tom's unwanted attention because this was not the first time he had waited for her. He gave her a small gift and asked her out again. Heather told him she did not want the gift and did not want to go on a date. She once more explained to him that she already had a boyfriend, and she did not want Tom to pursue her anymore. Tom replied that she was just playing hard to get and that she would eventually come around. Heather told him that he was acting like a stalker and should just leave her alone. As he turned to leave, Heather felt relieved, but worried and anxious about the next encounter. She wondered if she should skip her class next time just to avoid him.

The aforementioned vignette is representative of early stalking encounters that students experience on college campuses. Researchers have found that approximately 21% of college students have been stalked.¹⁻⁶ Further, data from a national sample indicate that 74% of stalking victims were between 18 and 39 years of age.⁷ College students of both genders report being stalked, ranging from 13% to 52.4% of female students¹⁻⁶ and 11% to 23.2% of males.^{4,5,8} Those who report being stalked note that the episodes last two years on average,⁹ constituting approximately half of the time it takes to earn an undergraduate degree. Collectively, these prevalence rates demonstrate that stalking victimization poses a threat to many college students and their academic success.

Stalking victims can be negatively affected psychologically and physically when the frequency and severity of the stalking episodes escalate, which can interfere with their normal routine.^{1,7,8,10-13} More specifically, stalking victimization often leads to adverse problems, such as mild to extreme fearfulness, drug abuse, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, headaches, and stomach problems.^{1,8,10-13} As a result, students may turn to college health and counseling centers for assistance. In fact, university counseling centers report that at least 33% of their student clientele desire psychological intervention for crimes of interpersonal violence, including being stalked.¹⁴ Victims are likely to make drastic changes to their lifestyle. For example, they may change their school, job, or city in which

they live.^{1,7,8} Importantly, those who are stalked may not go on to graduate on time as approximately 20% relocate; of those, 11% move out of town.⁷ Lifestyle changes in conjunction with the psychological and physical repercussions of being stalked may result in students dropping out of college altogether. For these reasons, stalking should be addressed by colleges and universities that are focused on student safety which, in turn, impacts retention, progression, and graduation.

Although previous research demonstrates that stalking is a significant social concern, prevalence rates vary widely.^{1,2,5,8,9} According to a meta-analysis, there are several methodological reasons for these inconsistent prevalence rates. One reason for this variability is a lack of consistency in how stalking was measured.⁹ For example, some researchers asked if the respondent had been stalked within the last 12 months, and others asked about lifetime prevalence rates.⁵ Further, how researchers determine whether stalking has taken place varies considerably among studies; this would include asking respondents if they had been stalked by anyone during their lifetime based on the respondent's personal definition⁸ or based on a definition provided by the researchers.² Others have asked respondents if they had been stalked by an intimate person within the past year based on the respondent's personal definition.¹ To our knowledge, only one study addressed the prevalence of stalking during college enrollment.³ However, participants were labeled as stalking victims by the researchers, not by self-identification.³

Another reason for differences in reported prevalence rates is based on the characteristics of the sample. For example, general population samples have lower prevalence rates than college student samples.⁷ Even reported rates within college student samples vary based on the demographics of the university's population.³ For example, previous research suggests that prevalence rates would be higher for an all-women's college compared to an all-men's college.⁹

Additionally, most state laws include in their definition of stalking unwanted, repeated, implicit, or explicit threatening behavior or intrusions resulting in psychological distress and reasonable fear.^{7,15} However, legal definitions can vary by state, and interpretations of the reasonable person standard can vary by individual. Thus, it is difficult to assess how wide-

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¹ Literature review excerpt from McNamara, C. L., & Marsil, D. F. (2012). The prevalence of stalking among college students: The disparity between researcher and self-identified victimization. *Journal of American College Health*, 60, 168-174. Copyright © 2012 by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

95 spread stalking is on campuses due to these measure- 145
ment, sampling, and legal issues.

In order to effectively determine whether a cul-
ture of violence exists, it is important for college cam-
puses to focus on obtaining accurate data about the
100 prevalence of stalking that is part of a larger cycle of 150
interpersonal violence. Although some college cam-
puses have begun to recognize this problem, the man-
ner in which crime statistics are reported and the way
the issue is addressed vary by university. Federal law

mandates annual reporting of some crimes that occur
on all campuses; however, this does not include in-
stances of stalking.¹⁶ As a result of these factors and
because victims of violence often underreport, we do
not have an accurate assessment of the prevalence

110 rates of interpersonal violence, particularly with col-
lege students. Therefore, it is not sufficient for univer-
sities to rely on police reports for accurate prevalence
rates of stalking victimization.

Prevalence rates suggest that stalking behavior
115 may be perceived as normative in our society. Accord-
ing to the social norms theory, social norms are
accepted explicit and implicit rules of behavior that
govern how individuals interact with others. Unfortu-
nately, sometimes perceived social norms are incor-
rect. In fact, many people may not endorse a particular

120 social norm, yet because they believe others approve
of that norm, they continue to tolerate it. Previous
research demonstrates that using a social norms ap-
proach can be an effective framework for addressing
interpersonal violence, such as stalking.^{17,18} To use the

125 stalking vignette as an example, an individual may
think that his/her peers believe it is acceptable for Tom
to repeatedly pursue Heather despite being told that his
behavior is unwanted. Although the individual may
130 not personally engage in that behavior, a social norm
that is accepting of interpersonal violence would likely
prevent the individual from intervening in that situa-
tion. By systematically changing these inaccurate so-
cial norms, tolerance for interpersonal violence will be

135 reduced, thus fostering more appropriate behaviors.

The Present Study

A first step in implementing a social norms
framework is to determine rates of stalking, thus estab-
lishing a need to reform a culture of violence if one
exists.¹⁷ The purpose of this study was threefold. First,
140 we updated prevalence rates using self-identification
(respondents' own definition) and behavioral measures
(researcher definition) of stalking victimization. Sec-
ond, we assessed whether students who affirm they
have experienced stalking behaviors then label such

behaviors as stalking. Finally, we analyzed the demo-
graphic and behavioral factors that might predict stalk-
ing victimization. The findings from this research
allow us to demonstrate the extent stalking is a prob-
lem for college students, to compare this sample to
national prevalence rates, and to educate personnel in
higher education on how to recognize and prioritize
stalking prevention and education issues for the cam-
pus community.

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