

STALKING AND SERIOUS VIOLENCE

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This presentation reports the results of a study into the associations of serious violence in stalkers.

Published data on violence and stalking comprise descriptions of groups of violent stalkers in series of collected cases, and associations of violence within such samples. The later, unlike the former, may be generalisable to other samples. Two studies have reported associations with violence. Harmon *et al* (1998) found highly significant associations between violence and former intimacy, threats to the victim, and substance abuse. Mullen *et al* (1999) found highly significant associations with threats and previous convictions, and less powerful associations with substance abuse and the absence of psychosis. Harman and her colleagues defined violence as 'physical assault, attack or damage to property, including any physical contact (e.g. banging on a door repeatedly), any physical contact with the target, someone close to the target, or a surrogate for the target'. Mullen and his colleagues registered 52 assaults in their series of 145 cases. The assaults produced injuries which were 'largely confined to bruises and abrasions'. There were otherwise one fractured jaw, one stab wound, six indecent assaults, and 8 attempted or accomplished rapes. The violence in the published studies appears to have been predominantly minor violence.

The specialist literature lists a number of characteristics of stalkers at high risk of assaulting their victims. These include: substance abuse; a history of criminal offending, particularly violent and sexual; being male; making threats; having a personality disorder; pursuing an ex-intimate; and being unemployed. A stereotype emerges, that of a substance abusing male, with a criminal record and history of violence, who has a personality disorder, is unemployed and pursues an ex-intimate, making threats.

We wished to determine whether this stereotype applied to perpetrators of serious, as opposed to minor, assaults. Our study sample comprised 67 cases, all assessed by one forensic service in north London, with a catchment area of 3 million people. Referrals to the service were taken from courts, remand prisons, hospitals and the probation service. The definition of stalking used was similar to that of Mullen *et al* (1999). Stalking was taken as a repetitive, multiple, unwanted intrusions or communications, which took place over a period of at least four weeks and which induced fear in the victim. This is notably different to the definition adopted by Harman *et al* (1998), which was: unsolicited and unwelcome behaviour, with more than two incidents, which were 'alarming, annoying or harassing'. In our sample, violence against the person occurred in 25 cases, this being 37% of the sample. Violence was not trivial. The violent cases comprised seven homicides, 11 serious woundings (mainly stabbings), and 7 lesser assaults (assaults occasioning 'actual bodily harm').

We found no evidence of any association between serious violence and a history of substance abuse, or substance abuse at the time of the index offence. In contrast to reports concerning minor violence, seriously violence stalkers were statistically less likely to have a criminal record. They were less likely to be unemployed. They were not significantly more likely to have a personality disorder. Other significant associations with serious violence were; former sexual intimacy; going to the victim's home at an earlier stage in the stalking; earlier violence in the stalking, either to people or be property; not giving unwanted gifts to the victims; use of a greater number of types of stalking behaviour; and a shorter length of pursuit. A multi-variate analysis produced a model comprising previous sexual relations with the victim; previously appearing at the victim's home during stalkings; and being in employment. This correctly predicted the presence or absence of serious violence in 84% of the sample.

The study also examined associations between stalking and homicide. Numbers were small, homicides comprising seven cases, or 10.5% of the sample. Significant associations were found between homicide and: absence of substance abuse; being in employment; not being psychotic; and having previously turned up at the victim's home during the stalking.

The main conclusion of the study was that serious assaults may have different associations from minor assaults. Serious violence is qualitatively different to minor acts of violence, such as those to property included in some previous studies. Minor assault is more likely to involve those in whom violence is an habitual style of social interaction; disinhibition by substance use or psychosis; a previous record of such behaviour; and a degree of social marginalisation. The most serious assaults are more likely to be catastrophic events, and involve those with no history of violence, no criminal past, and outwardly normal and socially integrated behaviour.

The presentation will look at indications that different degrees of violence may have different associations, and will suggest possible implications of the study for future research into stalking and violence.