

# Stalking and Intimate Partner Femicide

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*An 18-item stalking inventory and personal interviews with knowledgeable proxy informants and victims of attempted femicide were used to describe the frequency and type of intimate partner stalking that occurred within 12 months of attempted and actual partner femicide. One hundred forty-one femicide and 65 attempted femicide incidents were evaluated. The prevalence of stalking was 76% for femicide victims and 85% for attempted femicide victims. Incidence of intimate partner assault was 67% for femicide victims and 71% for attempted femicide victims. A statistically significant association existed between intimate partner physical assault and stalking for femicide victims as well as attempted femicide victims. Stalking is revealed to be a correlate of lethal and near lethal violence against women and, coupled with physical assault, is significantly associated with murder and attempted murder. Stalking must be considered a risk factor for both femicide and attempted femicide, and abused women should be so advised.*

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*Stalking, as defined in the National Violence Against Women (NVAW) survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), includes repeated*

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(e.g., two or more) occasions of visual or physical proximity, non-consensual communication, or verbal, written, or implied threats that would cause fear in a reasonable person. Using this definition, the results of the NVAW telephone survey of 8,000 U.S. women and 8,000 U.S. men found that 1% of the women and 0.4% of the men reported being stalked during the preceding 12 months.

The NVAW survey confirmed that most female victims know the stalker; only 23% of female victims were stalked by strangers. Overall, 62% of female victims were stalked by a current or former intimate partner, with 38% of the women reporting stalking by current or former husbands, 10% by current or former cohabiting partners, and 14% by current or former dates or boyfriends. Acquaintances and relatives composed the remaining groups of nonintimate, nonstranger stalkers. Stalking by an intimate partner occurred before the relationship ended for 21% of the women, after the relationship ended for 43%, and 36% of the women said stalking occurred both before and after the relationship ended (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

### **Stalking and Intimate Partner Assault**

Eighty-one percent of the women in the NVAW survey who were stalked by a current or former husband or cohabiting partner were also physically assaulted by the same partner (Tjaden &

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Thoennes, 1998). This supports other studies that report stalkers are more likely to be violent if they have had an intimate relationship with the victim (Coleman, 1997; Meloy, 1998). In addition, the NVAW survey confirmed the link between stalking and controlling behavior. Ex-husbands who stalked were significantly more likely than ex-husbands who did not stalk to engage in emotionally abusive (e.g., shouting and swearing) and controlling behavior (e.g., limiting contact with others, jealousy, and possessiveness). These same emotionally abusive and controlling behaviors clearly occur when women are assaulted by their intimate partners (Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997).

In 1996, women in the United States were victimized by intimates in about 840,000 incidents of rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. The highest percentage of intimate violence was among women aged 16 to 24 (Greenfeld et al., 1998), paralleling the results of the NVAW survey, which found that 52% of the female victims of stalking were 18 to 29 years of age. Thus, a strong connection appears to exist between intimate partner stalking and assault, with younger women more often victimized (Office of Justice Programs, 1998).

Although many more battered women are stalked by their perpetrators than are actually killed, it remains unclear who will be a stalker and what relationship stalking behavior has with severity of injury or death of the victim. However, the information that is available suggests that stalkers are worthy of attention because they are a potentially dangerous group. For instance, some experts on abuse warn that the most dangerous perpetrators can be identified by their stalking behavior (Hart, 1988), and psychologists believe that stalking behavior and obsessive thinking are highly related behaviors (Meloy, 1996). One study that profiled perpetrators of domestic violence by the presence or absence of stalking behavior, found stalkers, compared to nonstalkers, tended to live alone, were less likely to be married, and used more alcohol (Burgess et al., 1997). A profile of stalkers by Meloy (1998) noted that at least one half of stalkers explicitly threaten their victims, and although most threats are not carried out, the risk of violence increases when there is a verbal threat. Meloy further noted that the frequency of violence among stalkers toward the person being stalked averages in the 25% to 35% range, with the most

likely group of stalkers to be violent being those individuals who have had a prior sexually intimate relationship with the victim.

Authors agree that most victims of stalking suffer major life disruptions and serious psychological effects including anxiety, depression, and symptoms of trauma (Hall, 1998; Pathe & Mullen, 1997). It has been recommended that stalking be considered a risk factor for further physical abuse or a lethal incident just by virtue of the tenacious proximity-seeking toward the victim, especially if the stalking occurs in combination with other high risk behaviors (Walker & Meloy, 1998).

### **Prevalence and Perpetrator Characteristics of Intimate Femicide**

Women are more likely than men to be murdered by an intimate partner. In 1996, nearly 2,000 murders were committed by intimates, and in almost 3 out of 4 of these killings, the victim was a woman (Greenfeld et al., 1998). Women are more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than by all other categories of known assailants combined (Browne & Williams, 1993; Kellerman & Mercy, 1992). Over the past two decades, women account for an increasingly greater proportion of persons killed by an intimate. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report (1994), in 1977 54% of the victims killed by an intimate partner were females. By 1992, the proportion of female victims killed by intimates had increased to 70%. In addition, Greenfeld et al. (1998), tracing intimate murders since 1976, documented a decrease in intimate murders among men, Blacks (both male and female), and for murders involving firearms. However, the number of White females murdered by a nonmarital intimate has shown an increase in fatalities between 1976 and 1996 (the authors offered no explanation for the racial differential).

Partner femicides are frequently preceded by domestic violence and may involve the woman's recent separation from the relationship (Arbuckle et al., 1996; Campbell, 1992; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997). Felder and Victor (1997), for instance, estimated that between 29% and 54% of female murder victims (i.e., femicides) are battered women. Similarly, Moracco, Runyan, and Butts's (1998) study of 586 femicides in North Carolina between 1991 and 1993 document that 76.5% of partner femicides were

preceded by physical assault. In other research, male perpetrator behaviors that are repeatedly associated with partner femicide include perpetrator gun access and prior use, threats to use a weapon, previous serious injury inflicted toward the victim, extreme jealousy, threats of suicide, and drug and/or alcohol abuse (Bailey et al., 1997; Block & Christakos, 1995; Campbell, 1995; Moracco et al., 1998; Smith, Moracco, & Butts, 1998).

### **Prevalence and Perpetrator Characteristics of Attempted Intimate Femicide**

Little is known about the prevalence and perpetrator characteristics of attempted femicide. A recent report using Bureau of Justice statistics estimated that between 1992 and 1996, 51% of all female victims of partner violence were injured, with approximately 0.5% suffering a gun, knife, or stab wound (Greenfeld et al., 1998). The same report estimated about 1 million women are injured by an intimate partner each year and an additional 1 million are assaulted but not injured. Using the 0.5 percentage of gun, knife, and stab wounds, this would indicate upward to 5,000 women each year experience serious, life-threatening violence.

A stratified nonprobability sample of 91 hospitals in the United States that have at least six beds and provide 24-hour emergency service revealed the rate of nonfatal firearm injuries treated to be 2.6 times the national rate of fatal firearm injuries (Annest, Mercy, Gibson, & Ryan, 1995). This ratio of 2.6 nonfatal to 1 fatal injuries was the same for males and females aged 15 to 24 years; however, the ratio of nonfatal to fatal gunshot wounds for African American males and females aged 15 to 24 years was 4.1:1 and 4.3:1, respectively. Furthermore, 57% of these nonfatal firearm wounds required hospitalization.

There are few published reports that have described the prevalence of nonfatal firearm and stab wound injuries specific to abused women. However, a study of 329 pregnant Hispanic women revealed that 11% reported a knife or gun used against them within the last 12 months by the male intimate (Wiist & McFarlane, 1998). Another study of 90 abused women filing assault charges against an intimate revealed 24% had experienced a knife or gun used against them within the preceding 3 months (McFarlane, Willson, Lemmey, & Malecha, in press). Women who

report a weapon used against them also report significantly higher levels of physical abuse as well as higher scores on a lethality assessment scale (McFarlane, Soeken, et al., 1998).

### **Stalking Preceding Actual and Attempted Intimate Femicide**

Although the literature is sparse, it appears that when stalking occurs in conjunction with intimate partner violence, it may end in severe violence and/or possible femicide (Lingg, 1993; Pathe & Mullen, 1997; Perez, 1993). Yet, estimates of this linkage is virtually absent from the literature. In the only study found that makes an explicit attempt to do so, Moracco et al. (1998) found that of 586 femicide victims in North Carolina, half were murdered by a current or former partner; of these, 23.4% had been stalked prior to the fatal incident. No studies were identified that assessed stalking for attempted intimate femicide victims. Thus, a clear need exists for further research into this area.

### **The Present Research**

The purpose of this study is to describe the frequency and type of intimate partner stalking that preceded both attempted and actual partner femicide in a multisite national study of risk factors for femicide in violent intimate relationships. The results reported next derive from an ongoing research project, Risk Factors in Violent Intimate Relationships, the aim of which is to examine risk factors for serious nonlethal and lethal violence against women by their intimate partners. The authors examine the extent to which stalking is a potential risk factor of attempted and actual intimate partner femicide.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

These descriptive data are part of a 10-city study to determine the risk factors of actual and attempted intimate partner femicide. The sample for this report is drawn from the closed police records of these U.S. cities: Baltimore; Houston, Texas; Kansas City,

Kansas; Kansas City, Missouri; Los Angeles; New York; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; St. Petersburg/Tampa, Florida; and Wichita, Kansas. The cities were chosen based on size and their geographic representativeness of the United States.

Sampling began following agency approvals and institutional review boards approval for human subjects. At each site, coinvestigators worked with local law enforcement, the district attorney's office, and the medical examiners to identify closed records of women who had been victims of femicide or an attempted femicide by an intimate partner. The time period searched was 1994 through 1998. Inclusion criteria for intimate partner was a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or same sex partner. Inclusion criteria for attempted partner femicide was more complex, so is presented in Appendix A. A total of 141 femicides and 65 attempted femicides met the study criteria and form the basis for this report.

#### **Data Collection for Femicide Victims**

Using closed records, one or more potentially knowledgeable proxy informants, such as a parent, sibling, or other close relative of the deceased woman, were identified and contacted by mail. Once contacted, a prescreening questionnaire was administered to assess length of time the informant had known the victim and perpetrator and knowledge level about the relationship. Frequently, this person did not feel qualified to answer questions about the relationship and referred the investigator to other potential informants. When a knowledgeable informant was identified and consented, a brief demographic profile of the informant was completed, followed by an interview questionnaire about the relationship between the deceased woman and intimate partner. Following demographic information, questions focused on the characteristics of the relationship including type, frequency, and severity of any violence, as well as alcohol and/or drug use and use of health and criminal justice agencies. To profile the relationship of victim and perpetrator within a close proximity to the lethal event, questions focused on the 12 months preceding the femicide. The interview took about 1 hour. Approximately 10% of identified proxies refused to participate, at which point a second knowledgeable proxy was identified.

### **Data Collection for Attempted Femicide Victims**

Using the study criteria and closed records, women who had survived an attempt on their life were identified and contacted by mail. Once contacted and consent was obtained, a convenient time was arranged for the interview. As with the proxies, all interviews were conducted by doctorally prepared researchers or doctoral students experienced in conducting sensitive communications with victims of domestic abuse. The same questionnaire was used with the proxy informants and the victims. None of the identified attempted femicide victims refused to participate.

### **Instrument**

An 18-item survey was used to document the frequency and type of stalking by the intimate partner perpetrator during the 12 months preceding the attempted or actual femicide. The definition of stalking used for this study is similar to the Model Anti-stalking Code for States (National Criminal Justice Association, 1993) and is taken from a report by Tjaden and Thoennes (1998). Stalking is defined as "harassing or threatening behavior that an individual engages in repeatedly, such as following a person, appearing at a person's home or place of business, making harassing phone calls, leaving written messages, or objects, or vandalizing a person's property" (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998, p. 1).

The stalking survey is shown in Appendix B. The first 6 items were developed by Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) as part of the Violence and Threats of Violence Against Women in America Survey. Examples of these items include being followed or spied on, sent unsolicited letters or written correspondence, or finding the perpetrator standing outside the victim's home, school, or workplace. Content validity was established by a panel of experts. Twelve items were added from the Sheridan (1998) HARASS instrument to form the 18-item survey used in the present study. Examples of items added include threats by the abuser to harm the children or commit suicide if the woman left the relationship, leaving scary notes on her car, or threatening her family. In this study, reliability (coefficient alpha) was 0.80 for the group of 65 attempted femicide women and 0.84 for the group of 141 femicides. All stalking questions were limited to the 12-month period

before the attempted or actual femicide incident. Respondents answered yes or no to each stalking behavior.

## RESULTS

The sample consisted of 208 women, 141 who had been killed by their intimate partner and 65 who had survived an attempt on their life by their intimate partner. Demographic variables for femicide and attempted femicide victims along with the test statistic, significance level, and degrees of freedom are presented in Table 1. Mean age, percentage of victims employed, and relationship status were almost identical for attempted and femicide victims; however, ethnicity and education varied, although not significantly. When compared to femicide victims, a greater proportion of attempted femicide victims were African American and had completed fewer years of education.

### Frequency, Type, and Extent of Stalking

Seventy-six percent of femicide and 85% of attempted femicide respondents reported at least one episode of stalking within 12 months of the violent incident. Shown in Table 2 is the type and prevalence of stalking behavior experienced, along with chi-square and significance values. The most frequently reported stalking behavior for both femicide and attempted femicide victims was being followed or spied on. Additional stalking behaviors reported by almost half of all women was the intimate partner perpetrator sitting in a car outside her home or work site and receiving unwanted phone calls. Due to the 18 comparisons made between completed and attempted femicides, the Bonferroni technique was used to guard against Type I error rate by limiting the studywide error rate to a .05 alpha level (Dunn, 1961). This alpha rate was spread over the number of chi-square tests conducted for a significance level of .002 (i.e.,  $.05/18 = .002$ ). Using this standard, none of the 18 stalking behaviors varied significantly between femicide and attempted femicide victims.

To determine the extent of stalking experienced, the number of stalking behaviors was calculated for each woman. The number of stalking behaviors reported ranged from 1 to 15 for femicide

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographics and Relationship Status for Intimate Partner**  
**Femicide (*n* = 141) and Attempted Femicide (*n* = 65) Victims**

	<i>Femicide</i>	<i>Attempted Femicide</i>
Age	34.87 ( <i>SD</i> = 13.9)	33.48 ( <i>SD</i> = 9.6)
Race		
African American (%)	38	52
White (%)	31	23
Latino/Hispanic (%)	24	20
Other (Native American/ Asian Pacific Islander) (%)	7	5
High school graduate (%)	71	57
Employed, full- or part-time (%)	66	62
Relationship status		
Current partner (%)	64	66
Ex-partner (%)	36	34

NOTE: Age =  $T = 0.709$ ;  $p = 0.106$ . Race =  $\chi^2 = 3.646$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = 0.302$ . High school graduate =  $\chi^2 = 3.536$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.06$ . Employed =  $\chi^2 = 0.461$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.497$ . Relationship status =  $\chi^2 = 0.031$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.861$ .

victims and 1 to 12 for attempted victims. Mean values were 4.2 ( $SD = 3.7$ ) for femicide victims and 4.6 ( $SD = 3.5$ ) for attempted femicide women. The difference between the means was not statistically significant.

### Physical Abuse and Stalking

When asked if the intimate partner perpetrator had physically abused the woman within the year prior to the violent incident, 67% of the femicide informants and 71% of the attempted femicide victims said yes. Among femicide informants reporting yes to physical abuse by the perpetrator, 89% also reported stalking, compared to 56% of the nonabused femicide victims reporting stalking, a statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 15.42$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .0001$ ). Therefore, if a femicide victim was physically abused prior to the murder, she was also far more likely to also be stalked. Among attempted femicide victims, a significant relationship between physical abuse and stalking also existed. Approximately 91% of the attempted femicide victims who reported abuse within the year prior to the incident also reported stalking compared to 68% of the nonabused women reporting stalking ( $\chi^2 = 5.2$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .022$ ).

**TABLE 2**  
**Percentage of Femicide and Attempted Femicide Victims**  
**Experiencing Stalking Within 12 Months of the Lethal or Near-Lethal Event**

<i>Perpetrator Stalking Behavior</i>	<i>Femicide (%)</i>	<i>Attempted Femicide (%)</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p Value</i>
Sent unwanted letters	10	15	1.081	0.299
Followed or spied	53	60	1.021	0.312
Unwanted phone calls	45	43	0.117	0.732
Waited outside house/school/work	47	46	0.000	0.994
Left threatening messages on phone	22	12	2.898	0.089
Communicated in other ways against her will	33	39	0.550	0.458
Destroyed/vandalized property	34	49	3.665	0.056
Frightened with a weapon	39	40	0.000	0.983
Threaten to harm kids if victim left	13	11	0.269	0.604
Threatened to kill self if victim left	19	34	5.788	0.016
Threaten to take kids if victim left	15	17	0.126	0.723
Frightened victim's family	24	31	1.013	0.314
Left threatening notes on victim's car	10	11	0.017	0.895
Threatened to report drug use	4	3	0.079	0.778
Threatened to report to authorities	4	8	1.258	0.262
Threatened to leave victim	15	14	0.052	0.819
Tried to get victim fired from job	16	19	0.112	0.738
Hurt a pet on purpose	11	11	0.001	0.972

### Relationship Status and Stalking

Former intimate partners were more likely than current intimates to stalk both femicide and attempted femicide women; 69% of the femicide victims in current relationships reported stalking by the perpetrator compared to 88% of femicide victims reporting the relationship had ended. Among attempted femicide victims, 63% of the women in current relationships reported stalking compared to 68% in ended relationships. Finally, when asked if the woman had reported the stalking behaviors, 54% of the femicides and 46% of the attempted femicide respondents answered affirmatively. The most common reporting agency for both groups of women was the police. Although none of these differences were found to be statistically significant, they demonstrate further the relatively high level of stalking among both groups.

## DISCUSSION

This study found that 76% of femicide and 85% of attempted femicide victims had experienced stalking within 12 months of their actual or attempted murder. The most frequent type of stalking reported was following or spying, followed by surveillance by the perpetrator from a parked car outside the woman's house or work site. Neither type nor extent of stalking significantly differ by femicide or attempted femicide group. When asked about physical abuse during the same time period as the reported stalking, femicide victims were far more likely to have been stalked if they reported abuse. Although in the same direction, the stalking and physical abuse relationship was not as strong for attempted femicide victims. This study did not assess if stalking preceded or followed abuse.

Although former intimate partners were more likely to stalk than current partners, the association was not significant. This finding adds strength to the fact that abused women are at the highest risk for further harm or actual death from the point of ending the relationship to about 2 years postseparation (Campbell, 1992, 1995; Meloy, 1998).

Compared to the study by Moracco et al. (1998) that reports 23.4% of intimate partner femicide victims stalked, these findings reveal a much higher stalking prevalence of 76%. The difference is most likely due to this study's use of proxy informants who knew the victim and perpetrator, whereas Moracco et al. relied on police knowledge. Forty-two percent of the women in this study had not reported the stalking to the police. Overall, results are in line with those of the NVAW survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998); both sources indicate a strong association between intimate partner assault and stalking as well as the occurrence of stalking both by current and former intimate partners.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusions are straightforward. During the 12 months before an intimate partner attempted or actually murdered, more than three fourths of the women were stalked and two thirds were

physically assaulted. The association between assault and stalking was strongest for murdered women but it appears that both intimate partner assault and stalking are risk factors for lethal and near-lethal violence for women, especially when these two perpetrator behaviors occur together. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions do not consider stalking by itself grounds for orders of protection and antistalking laws are difficult to enforce for batterers. Although 19% of this sample were stalked but not abused, results suggest that these women were still at serious risk to serious, even deadly, harm.

Although both stalkers and nonstalkers were reported as extremely violent in this sample, the task now is to identify the singular contribution of stalking toward intimate partner femicide and attempted femicide. Risk profiles for lethality have not traditionally included stalking behavior although stalking can definitely be considered a dimension of dominance and control. Certainly, stalking can be conceptualized at the extreme end of the continuum of controlling psychologically abusive behaviors; however, these behaviors tend not to be included on psychological abuse instruments. In addition, the occurrence and/or extent of stalking behavior and its association with intimate partner lethality has not been recorded or reported within existing record systems or research studies.

Clearly, researchers must consider the impact of stalking on intimate partner femicide and attempted femicide for women in all age groups. Is there a severity and pattern sequencing to intimate partner stalking? Does public stalking precede or follow secretive stalking (i.e., hang-up phone calls, anonymous mail, and spying). How do stalkers who physically assault differ from stalkers who do not assault? Efforts are urgently need to compile detailed information on stalking and intimate partner violence. It is essential to include stalking in risk models for intimate partner violence against women and in risk assessments to apprise women of their danger.

APPENDIX A  
Inclusion Criteria for Attempted Partner Femicide

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1. Gunshot or stab wound to the head, neck, or torso.
  2. Gunshot directed at the woman.
  3. Hit with an object, kicked with a steel-toed boot, or otherwise beaten badly enough to cause death or result in loss of consciousness or internal injuries.
  4. Held under water with loss of consciousness or internal injuries.
  5. Strangulation with loss of consciousness.
  6. Victim suffered severe injuries that could have easily lead to death.
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APPENDIX B  
Stalking Survey

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Please answer yes or no to the following. During the 12 months before the attempted or lethal incident did the perpetrator

1. Send the victim unwanted letters?
  2. Follow or spy on the victim?
  3. Make unwanted phone calls to the victim?
  4. Stood or sat in a car outside the victim's house, school, or workplace?
  5. Left threatening messages on the telephone answering machine?
  6. Tried to communicate with the victim in other ways against her will?
  7. Destroyed or vandalized the victim's property or destroyed something she loved?
  8. Frightened the victim with a weapon?
  9. Threatened to harm the children if the victim left (or didn't come back)?
  10. Threatened to kill himself (or victim) if the victim left (or didn't come back)?
  11. Threatened to take the children if the victim left (or didn't come back)?
  12. Frightened or threatened the victim's family?
  13. Left scary notes on the victim's car?
  14. Threaten to report the victim to the authorities for taking drugs or for other things the victim did not do?
  15. Threatened to report the victim to child protective services, immigration, or to other authorities if the victim did not do what the perpetrator said?
  16. Threatened to leave the victim if victim didn't do what he said?
  17. Tried to get the victim fired from her job?
  18. Hurt a pet on purpose?
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