

UNMASKING STALKING



National Stalking Awareness Week

April 19th – 23rd 2021

A Changing Landscape

suzy lamplugh
trust

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A survey by Suzy Lamplugh Trust to better understand stalking victims' experiences during Covid-19 shows a concerning increase in stalking behaviours during the pandemic. While survey respondents reported a rise in both online and offline behaviours, an increase in online behaviours was more frequently experienced, indicating a rise in cyberstalking over the last year.

Furthermore, the intensity and frequency of perpetrators' obsessive and fixated behaviours has also increased for some victims, which respondents linked to the impact of lockdown restrictions, highlighting new and increased risks for victims of stalking.

In addition, respondents' often unsatisfactory experiences with the criminal justice system highlight that stalking behaviours continue to be misrecognised and misunderstood by the police and courts, resulting in a lack of support for victims. This points to insufficient knowledge of stalking legislation, in particular Stalking Protection Orders, which seemingly are not being used for the majority of stalking cases despite the enhanced protections they provide. Given the inadequate response by the police in a large proportion of cases, many stalking victims unsurprisingly indicated a lack of trust in the police to take appropriate (or indeed any) action if they report stalking behaviours.

The survey also reveals the pandemic as having a devastating impact on many victims' mental health, exacerbating the trauma, distress and anxiety caused by stalking behaviours. In particular, respondents indicated that the physical restrictions of lockdown, as well as the resulting social isolation, had affected their safety and psychological wellbeing – with these elements often interlinked.

However, despite often inadequate support, survey respondents also noted encouraging examples of good practice or advice received from specialist services, the police, and also lawyers, which helped them tackle changes in stalking behaviour during the pandemic.

Drawing on the findings of the survey, alongside data from the National Stalking Helpline, the report concludes with policy recommendations for the criminal justice system and wider public services to better support victims of stalking. It is estimated that the helpline supports approximately 4,000 victims of stalking a year.

WHAT IS STALKING?

Suzy Lamplugh Trust defines stalking as a pattern of fixated and obsessive behaviour which is repeated, persistent, intrusive and causes fear of violence or engenders alarm and distress in the victim. Stalking can include many types of unwanted behaviour such as regularly sending flowers or gifts, making repeated or malicious communication, damaging property and physical or sexual assault. Stalking often has a huge emotional impact on those it affects. It can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and even post-traumatic stress. It can be a psychological as well as a physical crime.

Cyberstalking refers to using any form of online or digital technology to carry out fixated, obsessive behaviour (stalking) towards a victim. This includes all forms of social media and communications platforms, as well as technology that can be used on devices. Cyberstalking should be treated as seriously as offline stalking, with a consistent response to victims, whether the stalking takes place online or offline.

According to the ONS, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimates that there were around 1.5 million victims of stalking in the year ending March 2020.¹ While anyone can become a victim of stalking, statistics show that stalking is a gendered crime and linked to other forms of gender-based violence, such as femicides and domestic abuse.² In the UK, around 1 in 5 women as compared with 1 in 10 men will experience stalking in their lifetimes.

**IN THE UK, AROUND
1 IN 5 WOMEN
AS COMPARED WITH
1 IN 10 MEN**

**WILL EXPERIENCE STALKING
IN THEIR LIFETIMES**

INTRODUCTION: STALKING AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Over the last year, the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have had unprecedented effects on society, reaching into all aspects of everyday life. Within such profound societal shifts, the prevalence of violence and crimes against women has also been magnified.³ Calls to the National Stalking Helpline have risen, including both an increase in stalking victims who are stalked by ex-intimate partners but also victims who are not stalked by ex-intimates. Calls to the Helpline have also reflected an increase in cyberstalking, as well as greater levels of distress in victims when they first make contact with an advocate.

FOR THOSE WHOSE EXPERIENCE OF STALKING STARTED BEFORE LOCKDOWN

49%
CONFIRMED AN INCREASE
IN ONLINE BEHAVIOURS
THROUGHOUT
THE PANDEMIC
APPROXIMATELY A THIRD 32%
ALSO SAW A RISE IN OFFLINE BEHAVIOURS



In light of the concerning findings and trends documented by the Helpline, Suzy Lamplugh Trust carried out a pilot survey with 111 stalking victims to understand better experiences of stalking during the pandemic.⁴ This report outlines the key findings of this survey, alongside key data from the National Stalking Helpline.

¹ See ONS, Stalking: Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/stalkingfindingsfromthecrimesurveyforenglandandwales>

² According to recent research into 358 cases of femicide, 94% of cases analysed presented stalking behaviours, while coercive control and stalking were more often simultaneously present where there had been an intimate partner relationship, constituting 71% of femicides analysed. See Monkton Smith et al. (2017), *Exploring the relationship between Stalking and Homicide* (With the Homicide Research Group University of Gloucestershire Centre for Learning and Innovation in Public Protection. In association with Suzy Lamplugh Trust), accessible at: <https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1a6cf4d9-0df5-42be-8b02-4bdbc75fa264>

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseduringthecoronaviruscovid19pandemicenglandandwales/november2020#data-sources-and-quality>

⁴ See Annex B for methodology.

KEY FINDINGS

Survey respondents: stalking onset and gender

All survey respondents are victims of stalking (current or historic), having experienced at least one or more stalking behaviours.⁵ The majority of survey respondents (86%) reported that stalking behaviours started before the first lockdown in March 2020, while 15% of participants reported that stalking began after the first lockdown.⁶

Aligning with the understanding of stalking as a VAWG crime, most survey respondents identified as women (89%). Correspondingly, 79% of victims supported by the National Stalking Helpline in the last year have identified as women.

Perpetrator relationship to victim

The majority of survey respondents are being or have been stalked by an ex-intimate partner (61% of all survey respondents). This compares with 7% of respondents who indicated that they were a victim of stranger stalking.

However, the percentage of respondents being stalked by an ex-intimate has risen during the pandemic. 76% of respondents whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown in March 2020 are being stalked by an ex-intimate, in comparison with 58% of respondents whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown (see Table 1).

These findings suggest that, alongside the potential rise in domestic abuse cases during the pandemic, there may also have been an increase in stalking cases perpetrated by ex-intimates. While further research is certainly required to understand ex-intimate partner stalking during Covid-19, as well as any connections with domestic abuse, the following comment by one survey respondent highlights the pandemic's potential impact on the fixated behaviours of ex-intimate stalkers who may conform to the 'rejected stalker' typology.⁷

'Although my stalker lives a considerable distance from me I felt that he used the pandemic as an excuse to contact me as he saw me as a sitting duck. He probably thought that I would be sitting around with nothing to do (fat chance!) only thinking about him and questioning whether I should have ended our relationship. The fact he contacted me via email made me anxious as despite having a criminal record for stalking he obviously thinks he's above the law and is still obsessed with resuming the relationship.'

Surprisingly, the percentage of respondents being stalked by a stranger is also higher among victims whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown; 12% compared with 6% of victims whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown.⁸

Table 1: Victim relationship to the stalker

What is your relationship to the stalker	Survey Respondents	
	Stalking started before first lockdown	Stalking started after first lockdown
Ex-intimate partner	58%	76%
Other	13%	6%
Friend / Ex-Friend	6%	0%
Acquaintance	6%	0%
Colleague / Ex-Colleague	5%	0%
Stranger	6%	12%
Neighbour	4%	0%
Family member	1%	6%
Total Respondents	100%⁹	100%



⁵ When asked 'Do you think you are currently or have previously been a victim of stalking', 96% of respondents identified as a victim of stalking, while 4% of respondents were not sure. However, all respondents indicated that they had experienced one or more specific stalking behaviours (or increases in behaviours) in later questions.

⁶ 2 respondents identified that they had experienced stalking before and after the first lockdown, with one respondent clarifying that she has two stalkers. Where respondents are grouped by stalking onset, these 2 respondents are included in each group (i.e. twice).

⁷ Mullen, P., Pathé, M., Purcell, R., Stuart, G.W., (1999), 'Study of Stalkers', *Am J Psychiatry* (156:8), pp.1244-1249. <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/pdf/10.1176/ajp.156.8.1244>

⁸ The numbers for the post-lockdown group are small overall (2 respondents being stalked by a stranger). In addition to the common relationships highlighted in Table 1, four respondents (experiencing the start of stalking before the first lockdown) identified their stalker as the (ex-)intimate of an (ex-)intimate partner, while a further two respondents identified their stalker as a professional acquaintance. One respondent experiencing the start of stalking after the first lockdown identified their stalker as a 'social media follower', aligning with the rise in online behaviours experienced during the pandemic (see below).

⁹ Given rounding to nearest percent, this total is slightly under 100%.

Changing stalking behaviours

Concerningly, findings from the survey suggest that both online and offline stalking have increased during the pandemic. However, the rise in online stalking behaviours appears to be greater overall, aligning with evidence documented by the National Stalking Helpline of an increase in cyberstalking during the pandemic.

Comparing online and offline stalking behaviours

Three-quarters of respondents (75%) confirmed that they experienced both online and offline behaviours, which likely compounds the trauma of being stalked.

Online/digital stalking behaviours were slightly more commonly experienced by respondents whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown, with 88% experiencing one or more online/digital behaviours. This compares with 85% of respondents whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown.¹⁰ This rise aligns with data from the National Stalking Helpline, which shows a rise in cyberstalking during the pandemic, with 100% of cases presenting to the Helpline now involving a cyber element. However, there is only a relatively small difference in the overall percentage of victims experiencing online/digital behaviours between the two groups, thereby highlighting the high prevalence of cyberstalking prior to the pandemic. In April 2020, our Helpline advisors reported that at least 80% of the calls and emails in the previous year mentioned online stalking behaviours.

Furthermore, victims whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown experienced slightly fewer online/digital behaviours (4 on average) in comparison with victims whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown (5 on average).¹¹

Five of the eight most common online/digital stalking behaviours were much more prevalent among respondents whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown (Table 2). Notably, 82% of victims whose experience of being stalked started during the pandemic have experienced stalking behaviours via social networking sites. This compares with 59% of respondents whose experience of being stalked started before the first lockdown.¹²

For example, one victim whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown, explained her stalker's obsessive behaviour via social media:

'Requesting password resets for all of my social media...I've received over 200 password reset links to my new phone number and email address that the stalker has requested.'

Another respondent, reflecting more generally on increases in online stalking behaviour since the pandemic, noted:

'An increase in obsessive people online (all male) possibly due to increased time spent online, break-ups, boredom and loneliness.'

Table 2: 8 most common online/digital stalking behaviours

Offline stalking behaviour	Survey Respondents	
	Stalking started before first lockdown	Stalking started after first lockdown
Text messages or direct messages	65%	65%
Social networking sites	59%	82%
Third party contact (online)	47%	65%
Emails	34%	53%
Threats via digital communication (online)	27%	47%
Contact in/via workplace (online)	26%	12%
Threatening suicide via digital communication (online)	21%	35%
Unauthorised access to online accounts or devices	20%	18%

On the other hand, offline stalking behaviours were more commonly experienced by respondents who were initially stalked prior to the pandemic. 92% of victims who experienced the onset of stalking prior to the first lockdown had experienced offline stalking behaviours in comparison with 76% of victims who experienced the onset of stalking after the first lockdown.

¹⁰ When selecting online/digital behaviours experienced from the following list: Text messages or direct messages, social networking sites, third party contact (online), emails, threats via digital communication (online), contact in/via workplace (online), threatening suicide via digital communication, unauthorised access to online accounts or devices, hacking technology, revenge porn or threat of revenge porn, vexatious complaints via digital communication, death threats (online), use of drones.

¹¹ As in list of behaviours in previous footnote.

¹² When selecting offline behaviours experienced from the following list: visit house/work, loitering, spying, watching, third party contact (offline), following, letters, gifts (delivered in person/by post), threats (offline), threatening suicide (offline), in/via workplace (offline), criminal damage, breaking into your property, physical assault, sexual assault, death threats (offline), vexatious complaints (offline), tracking devices (offline).

Table 3: 8 most common offline stalking behaviours

Offline stalking behaviour	Survey Respondents	
	Stalking started before first lockdown	Stalking started after first lockdown
Visit house/work	61%	59%
Loitering	60%	47%
Spying	59%	35%
Watching	46%	24%
Third party contact (offline)	42%	29%
Following	39%	29%
Letters	29%	35%
Gifts (delivered in person / by post)	26%	41%

As highlighted by Table 3, the most common offline behaviours were more frequently experienced by respondents whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown, apart from the sending of letters and gifts, which have been more frequently experienced by victims whose stalking started after the first lockdown. The rise in sending letters and gifts as a 'socially distanced' behaviour highlights that the obsession and fixation which characterise stalking do not disappear under lockdown restrictions, but instead may take on new forms as perpetrators find other ways to stalk their victims.

It is also notable that while visiting victims' house/work was less commonly experienced by victims whose stalking began post-lockdown, the difference between groups is marginal; again highlighting that pandemic-related restrictions have not stopped perpetrators' fixated behaviour or their attempts to contact victims, whether on or offline. Furthermore, lockdowns may have paradoxically increased certain risks for some victims at home, causing heightened distress and fear, given that stalkers are more likely to know their victim's physical location at any given time. As one respondent chillingly recounted:

'I have remained on high alert, very aware that the stalker knows exactly where I am as the restrictions have limited my random movements in the lockdowns. This means that any noise, no matter how small, scares me intensely, living on nervous energy especially in hours of darkness.'

Increased stalking behaviours during the pandemic

When respondents were asked whether they had seen an increase in a range of specific stalking behaviours since Covid-19,¹³ 49% of victims whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown answered that they had seen an increase in one or more online behaviours, with 32% also seeing an increase in one or more offline behaviours.¹⁴ **In total, over half (56%) of victims whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown identified an increase in one or more stalking-behaviours (online and/or offline) since the first lockdown.**¹⁵ This aligns with changes documented by the National Stalking Helpline. For example, the month of March 2021 saw an 83% average rise in calls to the Helpline as compared to March 2020, with a worrying 10% overall increase in calls in the year from March 2020 to March 2021 as compared with the previous year.

Table 4: 9 most common increased online/digital stalking behaviours since Covid

Which stalking behaviours have increased since Covid-19? (Online/digital)	Survey respondents: Stalking started before first lockdown
Social networking sites	35%
Text messages or direct messages	15%
Third party contact (online)	13%
Emails	10%
Unauthorised access to online accounts or devices	9%
Vexatious complaints via digital communication (online)	7%
Hacking technology	7%
Threats via digital communication	6%
Contact in/via workplace (online)	6%

'The pandemic has emboldened the stalker and the use of cyber stalking has increased as has his use of enlisting others to assist with the stalking which has increased my risk of danger.'

¹³ The online and offline stalking behaviours as listed in footnotes above.

¹⁴ Excluding 28 responses who selected 'not applicable' to this question out of 96 total respondents. Not applicable responses have also been excluded from Tables 4&5, for example some respondents indicated that stalking had ended before the pandemic (i.e., historic).

¹⁵ Including 1 'other' behaviour, in addition to the closed list of increased online/offline behaviours (i.e., where respondent had not selected any of the behaviours in the closed list).

Table 5: 9 most common increased offline stalking behaviours since Covid

Which stalking behaviours have increased since Covid? (Offline)	Survey respondents: Stalking started before first lockdown
Spying	18%
Third party contact (offline)	15%
Visit house/work	13%
Loitering	13%
Watching	10%
Following	10%
Criminal Damage	4%
Vexatious complaints (offline)	4%
Sexual Assault	4%

In terms of offline behaviours following the pandemic, victims most frequently experienced an increase in spying (18%), followed by third-party contact (offline) (15%), visiting house/work (13%) and loitering (13%). As illustrated by one respondent's experience below, the increased anonymity provided by face coverings may be used by stalkers to perpetrate in-person stalking. For example, when explaining changes in stalking behaviour, one respondent highlighted:

'Being watch[ed] more and having face covering... being unable to see the person or ID them.'

One respondent, explaining changes since the pandemic, even noted an escalation from online to offline behaviours in their case, which may also be indicative of an increased intensity in stalking behaviours during the pandemic (see following section):

'Behaviour has escalated from online/texts and calls to actually physical visits and presents left on doorstep.'

THE INCREASED ANONYMITY PROVIDED BY FACE COVERINGS MAY BE USED BY STALKERS TO PERPETRATE IN-PERSON STALKING



Other changes to perpetrator behaviour during the pandemic

As highlighted in the previous section, some stalking victims also noted changes in the intensity as well as frequency of stalking over the course of the pandemic, something also noted by specialist stalking advocates on the National Stalking Helpline. In addition, a larger number of calls to the National Stalking Helpline exceeded the average call length of 40 minutes during the pandemic.

As one respondent noted:

'I think the stalking probably got more intense due to the fact lockdown would have caused boredom and increased obsessive thoughts because he didn't have anything else to do or think about.'

Other victims similarly commented on the psychological impacts of the pandemic, which may increase stalking behaviours in perpetrators. For example, one respondent noted the effect of the pandemic in heightening the obsessive characteristics of her stalker:

'I believe the man who stalked me had these traits prior to the pandemic. However the pandemic did impact on his mental health which ha[s] influenced how obsessive he was over me. He was also off work due to his mental health which [meant] he had more free time to harass me.'

Contrastingly, a couple of respondents indicated that the stalker has become more secretive or covert as a result of lockdown, which may also make stalking more difficult to evidence:

'Before it was more overt now post Covid harder to prove it is coming from my estranged husband.'

Continuities or decreases in stalking behaviours during the pandemic

Despite evidence of increased stalking behaviours during the pandemic, it is also important to note that for some victims, stalking behaviours have remained the same. These experiences highlight that stalking has its own internal dynamics (even if this may be influenced by external events, including the pandemic), which are grounded in the stalker's typology and specific psychology of fixation and obsession. As two respondents explained in answer to whether they had seen any changes in stalking behaviour since the pandemic:

'The behaviour has remained the same.'

'The usual. Communication issues, like sound of notifications turned off when I haven't touched it. Password recovery via email doesn't work (never get the link)...'

A small number of respondents even noted that the behaviour had decreased since the pandemic. Notably, one victim explained that even though stalking had decreased overall, they viewed this as part of the temporal fluctuations in long-term stalking behaviours. However, they also highlighted that the online element has been prevalent, aligning with the findings above of a higher prevalence in online/digital behaviours following the first lockdown:

'Overall it has decreased - but it has been going on for nine years and generally comes & goes anyway. In the last year it has only been through social media.'

Other respondents indicated that various external events resulted in a decrease in stalking behaviours during the pandemic, notably support from the police, having a legal protection in place or the stalker being in prison (highlighting the importance of adequate response by the criminal justice system – see section 4.4), as well as personal factors affecting the stalker's ability to perpetrate unwanted obsessive behaviours:

'Got a restraining order in Jan 2020 so hasn't been as bad.'

'He had to sell one of his businesses, the one closest to my old and new address so this has taken the wind out of his sails.'

'His wife has had to permanently reside at the marital home, which has not been the case pre lockdowns, which may have helped him to not stray the same as before. What will happen post lockdown - who knows - but it really frightens me that he will not be so controlled as he has been during lockdown.'

Given the different experiences of stalking victims, the police and criminal justice system must be attuned and sensitive to the complexity of stalking during the pandemic, with heightened stalking behaviours and risks for many victims, depending on stalker psychology and typology, as well as other events and factors.

Response from criminal justice system (CJS)

Evidence from the survey highlights a poor response to stalking across the criminal justice system, both before and after the start of the pandemic. This is also substantiated by data from the National Stalking Helpline highlighting for example the lack of the use of Stalking Protection Orders by the police in a number of cases reported to them. Victims' experiences highlight inadequate action across the CJS to prosecute perpetrators and support victims, indicating lack of adequate knowledge of stalking behaviours and legislation.

Reporting to the police

Fewer than two-thirds (63%) of all survey respondents indicated that they had reported stalking to the police in the UK.¹⁶ When respondents explained why they had not reported, the answers highlight a concerning lack of trust in the police and wider criminal justice system. Several respondents commented that they thought they would not be taken seriously, listened to or believed, with others indicating that police had previously been unhelpful or had not taken action in the past:

'I did [report] before Covid when he took over my TV and the Amazon Echo and worried he had a tracker still on my car but they did not do anything. They did not interview or arrest him. I know [it is] pointless if I go to them now.'

¹⁶ Out of 70 respondents who reported to the police in the UK, 2 reported to Police Scotland and 3 to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. One further respondent (not included in statistics in the following sections on response from criminal justice system) reported to the police in the USA.

Another respondent indicated that the low conviction rate for stalking was a disincentive to report. This victim's stark comment shows that the shocking attrition rate of stalking cases through the criminal justice system may have a negative effect on other victims' willingness to report to the police, thereby perpetuating the low level of prosecutions and convictions in stalking cases:¹⁷

'I know how bad the conviction rate is and I have no faith whatsoever that the police would actually take any action.'

A small number of respondents explained that they did not report as they did not feel they had any proof or evidence, thereby highlighting the importance of police training in how best to support and advise stalking victims to document and log evidence. Relatedly, several other respondents highlighted their own difficulty and confusion (at least initially) in recognising the seriousness of stalking, emphasising the importance of public awareness raising on the risks associated with this crime, in conjunction with improving police response:

'It was quite subtle at first and took me a while to figure what was occurring.'

'I didn't think it was serious enough and I could be over reacting.'

Several others explained that they had not reported given the threatening, abusive and manipulating behaviours of the stalker or that they were 'too scared' to report.¹⁸ These experiences further highlight the importance of specialist services in supporting victims through the trauma of stalking and helping them overcome the barriers to reporting:

'Whilst in a relationship with him I was a victim of psychological abuse (took many years to realise) he is a very convincing liar and has always made out he is a victim.'

Satisfaction with police response

Of respondents who did report stalking to the police, 59% considered their experience to be unsatisfactory or somewhat unsatisfactory, with only 20% saying their experience was satisfactory. This aligns with data from the National Stalking Helpline, who have reported that approximately 50% of victims they supported are not happy with the police response.

When asked why their experience with the police was unsatisfactory, the most common reasons selected by survey respondents indicated that the pattern of behaviour was not recognised as a stalking offence by the police (24%) or that the police did not understand the nature of stalking (13%).¹⁹ Alongside 'Other' reasons discussed below, the survey responses highlight inadequate police training on stalking.

Victims' experiences align with the concerning results of a recent Suzy Lamplugh Trust survey with the police, which found that only 35% of police respondents had ever received stalking specific training (10% of respondents received the training over 5 years ago),²⁰ with only 3% of respondents indicating that they were 'very confident' in their knowledge of stalking legislation, while 13% were 'not confident at all'.²¹ A further 82% indicated that 'better training on stalking' was needed for the police to be better equipped to deal with stalking.

WHEN LOOKING AT THE EXPERIENCE OF VICTIMS THROUGHOUT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

**OVER HALF
59%
OF ALL RESPONDENTS
REPORTED A WHOLLY
OR SOMEWHAT
UNSATISFACTORY EXPERIENCE
WITH THE POLICE**



¹⁷ While there were an estimated 1.5 million victims of stalking in England and Wales between April 2019 and March 2020, only 30,931 cases of stalking were reported to the police and, of these, only 3,067 were charged and 2,288 prosecuted according to data from the CPS. See Police Recorded Crime and Outcomes Table, ONS, Stalking: Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales Year ending March 2020, and Stalking Analysis Reveals Domestic abuse link, Dec 2020. Crime Prosecution Service, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-recorded-crime-open-data-tables>, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/stalkingfindingsfromthecrimesurveyforenglandandwales> and <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/stalking-analysis-reveals-domestic-abuse-link>

¹⁸ One respondent detailed 'Too scared to as he has so much dirt on me, I think I will get into trouble and he will get away with it.' Other barriers to reporting included personal/family links to the stalker, while four respondents reported through their workplace.

¹⁹ 9% also indicated that the investigation took too long, while 48% of respondents provided an 'Other' answer, as discussed further on this section.

²⁰ Suzy Lamplugh Trust 'Police survey on stalking' collected 1,427 responses from the police between November 2020 to February 2021.

²¹ On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating 'Not confident at all' and 5 indicating 'Very Confident', with 24% selecting 2, 42% selecting 3, and 18% indicating 4. However, a slightly higher proportion (9%) indicated that they were 'very confident' in their ability to identify the crime of stalking, with 4% not confident at all.

Even when victims highlighted instances of good practice from the police, lack of knowledge around stalking may continue to weaken the police response, alongside pandemic-related impacts resulting in failings to provide timely support:

'Due to the virus they took 6 weeks to take a statement from me...My experience with [local name of] police has been excellent but they fail to recognise unknown calls as a pattern of stalking behaviour instead of individual instances...he was invited for a voluntary interview...which was shocking...This is a huge failing in the system and allows the accused to delete messages and cover their tracks.'

Many 'Other' comments indicated that the police did not take stalking complaints seriously, were not interested or did not take action, thereby indicating that victims' lack of trust in the police (highlighted above) is not unfounded. Several respondents even indicated that the police were sympathetic to the stalker or believed the stalker's vexatious complaint. As one respondent explained, the police:

'failed me time and time again, I had to contact them several times over a space of a few days, months later he got off with it because they said he was an ex and claimed to be suffering mentally and wasn't aware of his actions, I had to move home, change numbers and hide.'

In one instance, the CPS dropped the case, which compounded the victim's difficult situation:

'The CPS dropped the case because there were some messages I had replied to...I feel that the police arresting him and CPS dropping the case was worse than had he not been arrested in the first place. It put me in a powerless position and he knew this. The police weren't interested in following anything up once CPS had decided not to prosecute.'

Other victims highlighted inconsistent responses across or within police forces, with one respondent perceiving gender differences:

'One officer (male) told me it wasn't a crime. The female officers were more sympathetic and actually did something about it.'

'When he breached the order during the first lockdown the matter was dealt with initially by [first] police [force] who were excellent but as he had moved to another area the case was transferred to [second] police [force] who clearly believed his lies and decided to take no further action. [Second] police [force] gave me the impression that this was a trivial matter (even though they arrested him). I felt like they were just following the guidelines to cover themselves.'

These revealing experiences highlight often inadequate police knowledge around stalking behaviours and legislation, and the urgent need for robust training to ensure a strong and supportive response for the victim. It is paramount that police recognise stalking as a pattern of fixated and obsessive behaviour to protect the victim and enable effective offender management according to the perpetrator's stalker typology, as well as ensuring that the perpetrator is charged under the stalking law to reflect the gravity of the crime.

Courts

In total, only 34% of respondents who reported to the police in the UK indicated that their case was subsequently brought to court. Almost half of cases were finally heard at Magistrates Court (46%), with a further third (29%) being heard at Crown Court.

Similarly to respondents' experience with the police, 63% of respondents detailed that they had a (somewhat) unsatisfactory experience with the courts,²² with the most common reasons for disappointing experiences being: inadequate protections from stalking (44% of respondents who detailed reasons), delays to the hearings (28%), the court did not understand the nature of stalking (22%), and the court not satisfactorily explaining to the victim why a certain decision was reached (11%).

In addition, the following comments highlight the often bewildering, exhausting and frightening nature of the court process for victims, which may compound their distress and trauma:

'The court commenced a hearing, I gave my evidence in chief, court then decided they hadn't set aside enough time for hearing and was rescheduled to start over, 3 months later where I had to do it all again.'



ONLY A THIRD OF RESPONDENTS 34% WHO REPORTED STALKING TO THE POLICE INDICATED THAT THEIR CASE WAS SUBSEQUENTLY BROUGHT TO COURT

²² Excluding n/a responses.

'He was allowed to cross examine me several times in court which was terrifying. He seemed to [get] a kick from frightening me and enjoyed the process.'

As highlighted by these experiences, it is imperative that courts support victims and put their needs first in the scheduling and conduct of court hearings, ensuring that the extreme trauma faced by many stalking victims is recognised and mitigated during the court process.²³ It is also vital that there is robust training in place for CPS prosecutors, judges and magistrates on stalking.

Protections for victims

In addition to a poor response from the CJS to their cases, survey respondents also highlighted the lack of stalking protections put in place to ensure their safety, with 60% of respondents who reported to the police in the UK indicating they had no protection successfully in place. **These findings indicate that the criminal justice system may be failing to protect over half of stalking victims who report to the police.**

Table 6: Protections put in place for victims

Were any of the following protections successfully put in place?	Percentage of survey respondents who reported to police in the UK
None	60%
Restraining Order	20%
Police Bail conditions for stalker	11%
Non-Molestation Order ²⁴	10%
Other order	6%
Civil injunction under the Protection from Harassment Act	1%
Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN)	0%
Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO)	0%
Non-Harassment Order (Scotland)	0%
Protection from Harassment Order (Northern Ireland)	0%

Were any of the following protections successfully put in place?

Stalking Protection Order (introduced in law in England and Wales 20/01/2020)

Percentage of survey respondents whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown, who reported to the police in England or Wales²⁵

9%

The most common protection in place for all stalking victims is a restraining order (Table 6), including for victims whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown (22% of respondents reporting to the police). However, the most common protection for victims whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown are Police Bail Conditions for the stalker followed by a Non-Molestation Order (36% and 18% of respondents reporting to the police respectively). Concerningly, only 9% of victims whose experience of stalking started after the first lockdown indicated they had a Stalking Protection Order (SPO) in place.²⁶ This data aligns with anecdotal findings from our London Stalking Support Service that police officers are advising victims of ex-partner stalking to apply for Non-Molestation orders rather than SPOs given delays in civil courts. However, over half (53%) of those living in England and Wales without an SPO thought that a SPO would be helpful in their case.

These findings highlight that the stalking legislation is not being used appropriately to protect stalking victims, whether as a result of inadequate police knowledge or other barriers in the criminal justice system. Unlike other non-stalking specific protections such as Non-Molestation Orders, SPOs place positive requirements on stalking perpetrators to manage specific risks on a case-by-case basis, and therefore must be applied to ensure the victim is protected.

AS MANY AS 63% OF ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS WHO ATTENDED COURT DETAIL THAT THEY HAD A WHOLLY OR SOMEWHAT UNSATISFACTORY EXPERIENCE WITH THE COURTS PROCESS



²³ See Taylor, Barnes, and Short (2019), *Key Findings from a Pilot Study into Health Care Responses to Stalking: Implications and Recommendations* (Produced by Sussex Stalking Support and the National Centre for Cyber Stalking Research, University of Bedfordshire, in association with the National Stalking Consortium).

²⁴ One further respondent who did not report to the police indicated they had a Non-Molestation Order in place.

²⁵ Out of 11 respondents who reported to the police.

²⁶ Two respondents whose stalking started before the first lockdown also indicated they had an SPO in place. However, it is not possible to provide an accurate percentage for this group as some respondents indicated their stalking was historic (i.e. stalking took place prior to the introduction of SPOs). A further respondent whose stalking started before the first lockdown indicated that 'There is a protection order for me (I don't know what it's called)'.

Impact on stalking victims' mental health

The devastating impact of stalking on mental health was highlighted by a 2020 survey carried out by Suzy Lamplugh Trust on stalking victims' health, which found that 94% of respondents' mental health had been impacted by the stalking.²⁷ While only 7% of respondents indicated their mental health as 'poor' prior to experiencing stalking, this rose to 48% after experiencing stalking.

However, the pandemic may further exacerbate the already damaging effect of stalking on mental health, as shown by the March 2021 survey of stalking victims. Half of respondents whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown thought that the impact of stalking on their mental health had worsened since the first lockdown (49%)²⁸, which may be linked in some cases to the increased intensity of stalking during the pandemic:

'The stalking has intensified and is now affecting all areas of my life, especially as I was working from home during the pandemic. So the loss of privacy, increased risk, increase in threats, intimidation and general bullying, harassment and stalking has led to me seeking private counselling.'

Other victims indicated that the psychological effects of the pandemic had intensified the distress caused by stalking, such as by making things 'more raw' or having 'more time to think about it'. As one victim explained:

'I'm just exhausted by the pandemic anyway, so all that stress added to the stress of stalking; and I had little else to distract me.'

94%
OF RESPONDENTS'
MENTAL HEALTH
HAD BEEN
IMPACTED
BY THE STALKING



Lockdown restrictions and risk to physical safety

Numerous respondents indicated that the physical restrictions of lockdown had negatively affected their physical safety and thereby mental health, with victims noting that they now feel more 'vulnerable', 'scared' or 'trapped' at home. One respondent even felt that she could not use the garden anymore because of her stalker, yet because of lockdown this outside space was 'even more important...than usual'. As one respondent explained:

'My mental health crashed in first lockdown. I could not go to work where I feel safer. I went on to anti-depressants.'

One respondent even had her panic button removed during lockdown by the police, again highlighting the importance of a supportive police response for victims during the pandemic, taking account of any heightened stalking risks which could impact on victims' physical safety and psychological wellbeing. When asked why her mental health had worsened since the first lockdown, she explained:

'Completely trapped in a house that was previously bugged with listening devices and phone hacking. Still living in the same house, so he knows where we are. Having my panic button removed in the first lockdown after having it for 18 months.'

Social isolation

Victims also indicated that the social isolation of lockdown, including not being able to access usual support networks such as friends and family or in-person support services, further increased the detrimental impact of stalking on their psychological wellbeing. As three respondents explained:

'he made my life hell, he made my kids suffer, during lockdown I felt alone and scared and he knew how trapped I was.'

²⁷ Suzy Lamplugh Trust 'Stalking victim health survey' was made available online from 19th October until 2nd November 2020, with 211 victims completing the survey.

²⁸ Excluding n/a responses.

HALF OF RESPONDENTS* THOUGHT THAT THE IMPACT OF 49% STALKING ON THEIR MENTAL HEALTH HAD WORSENERD SINCE THE FIRST LOCKDOWN



*whose experience of stalking started before the first lockdown

'I had been slowly growing in confidence and resilience until lockdown...My face to face social contact with anyone...had ground to a halt from the stalking. Pre-lockdown I was growing in confidence in this respect...Lockdown stopped this too.'

'the social isolation of lockdown restrictions combined with the isolation and fear that stalking creates makes it harder to ignore.'

Access to specialist mental health support

Despite these concerning findings on the impact of the pandemic on stalking victims' mental health, lockdown restrictions may be making it harder for victims to access psychological and other health support in an appropriate space. As Suzy Lamplugh Trust's previous 2020 health survey found, the pandemic and lockdown restrictions had impacted on the majority (59%) of stalking victims' ability to access healthcare services. As one respondent to the recent 2021 survey explained, she 'could no longer cope with [her] psychology sessions that were now online as [she] had no escape from the place where the stalking happened'.

These experiences highlight the importance of adequate and accessible specialist mental health services for stalking victims, particularly during the pandemic which may further heighten the trauma of stalking.

Stalking victims' experience of good practice



When asked about advice or good practice that has been helpful in tackling changes in stalking behaviour since the beginning of the pandemic, many victims discussed support and information they had received from specialised stalking, domestic abuse or sexual assault services (including sexual violence counselling). This underlines the importance of these services in understanding the victims' experience of stalking behaviours, as well as providing 'emotional support' and specialist advice:

'means I have someone to go to who understands and support me.'


'They actually took it seriously and didn't dismiss it as just a social media thing, like the police did.'

Notably, respondents received practical advice from specialist services on online safety and security, logging evidence and reporting, as well as protection through devices and alarms. However, two respondents also highlighted that charities were overstretched, with one explaining that her advocate had had to prioritise higher risk cases during the pandemic.

Various respondents also discussed good practice from the police or recommended reporting to the police. Examples of good practice include police advice on particular devices/apps, as well as other forms of support, such as providing permission to leave lockdown area. Examples of personal support for victims from the police included building close links with their neighbourhood team, regular patrols by PCSO or weekly support visits. These comments highlight the importance of strong police engagement and action at the in-person, local or neighbourhood level to ensure stalking victims are supported and protected during the pandemic:

'The support received from the Police has been fantastic including weekly support visits and phone calls as well as a critical marker on my property and assistance to move house.'

60%



OF VICTIMS WHO REPORTED STALKING TO THE POLICE IN THE UK SAID THEY HAVE NO LEGAL PROTECTIONS IN PLACE



The National Stalking Helpline has also highlighted examples of good communication and engagement from the police, where the Officer in Charge (OIC) provided regular updates to the victim and/or Helpline advocate depending on the victim's preferred mode of communication, as well as where the OIC readily engaged with the advocate, respecting and understanding their role. For example, in a couple of recent cases, the OIC acknowledged that they had never applied for an SPO before and deferred to the Helpline's advice as stalking experts. The Helpline has also seen a few cases of best practice where the OIC immediately applied for an SPO as soon as the stalking investigation began.

Several respondents mentioned good advice from lawyers, with one respondent explaining that a lawyer had advised on police handling of the case and evidence gathering around cyberstalking, thereby highlighting again the often inadequate police response, despite some examples of good practice.

Various respondents had also received advice across services (with one respondent noting the importance of the council landlord fitting CCTV/changing locks). Such experiences indicate the importance of a multi-agency approach, yet also the difficulty in accessing adequate support:

'I spoke to Women's Aid, Social Services, Victim Support, NIACRO, my GP, the PSNI, 4 solicitors and a therapist. Only Women's Aid, one social worker and two of the 6 police officers I've spoken to seemed to understand the full gravity of my situation.'

Many respondents also discussed actions they had taken independently of any support services (two as a result of police being 'useless' or 'dreadful'), including finding ways to support their own wellbeing, such as spending time in nature or undertaking therapy, as well as making contact with their own support networks, finding information online regarding stalking and managing their own cases and safety. These individual actions lay bare the need for properly funded and trained specialist and statutory services to adequately support stalking victims, including those experiencing online behaviours, so that they are not facing the trauma and risks of stalking alone, and to ensure their ongoing safety and protection.

**WE SUPPORT
APPROXIMATELY
4,000
VICTIMS
OF STALKING
A YEAR**



RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy recommendations

- 1) The police and wider criminal justice system must be adequately trained to take all accounts of stalking seriously and to recognise patterns of behaviour that amount to stalking, as well as responding promptly to ensure risk is assessed at the earliest opportunity. Within this, online/digital stalking behaviours (cyberstalking) must be recognised and understood by the police and criminal justice system, as well as the complex links with offline behaviours.
- 2) The police and wider criminal justice system must be aware of, and sensitive to, the potentially increased risks for stalking victims during the pandemic as a result of lockdown restrictions and increased intensity of stalking behaviours.
- 3) The police and wider criminal justice system must be adequately trained to use the stalking legislation correctly, including SPOs, to ensure perpetrators are prosecuted appropriately and victims supported and protected as soon as they report their case to the police.
- 4) Training for stalking advocates must be trauma informed in order to skill advocates to be able to promote psychological wellbeing through the provision of concrete strategies to manage signs of trauma, supporting clients to manage internal as well as external safety.²⁹
- 5) The court system must put measures in place to mitigate the potential distress caused to stalking victims through the court process. As part of this, any delays to hearings must be minimised and victims kept fully informed. In addition, cross-examination of stalking victims by perpetrators must be urgently prohibited.
- 6) Stalking perpetrators must be managed through a holistic multi-agency stalking intervention programme (MASIP), both for the successful identification of high risk stalkers and for tailored perpetrator management. This approach aims to reduce risk and reoffending. It focuses on identifying and addressing the specific patterns of fixated, obsessive behaviour as well as individual motivations of stalkers depending on their typology. It offers bespoke intervention, rather than treating all cases as the same.
- 7) Suzy Lamplugh Trust calls for a national task group to examine closely the low levels of prosecutions and devastating attrition rates in regard to stalking cases across the entire criminal justice system. This includes the use of Stalking Protection Orders which to date have been insufficiently used by police forces across England and Wales.
- 8) The government must adequately fund all specialist stalking support services, to ensure victims are sufficiently and appropriately supported.

²⁹ Our model of trauma informed training is SSPA - Stalking Specialist Psychological Advocacy, based on the PATH model developed by Dr Roxane Agnew-Davies for domestic abuse and tailored for victims of all stalking typologies.

CONFRONTING CYBER STALKING

Advice to UNDERSTAND and protect your cyber security

(Suzy Lamplugh Trust and the Cyber Helpline)



U – Understand your online security

- Ensure you have strong passwords (and change them regularly) as well as two-factor authentication.
- Check your privacy settings on social media and only allow access to trusted contacts.
- Be careful about who you accept new friend/connection requests from as the stalker could be using a fake profile.

N – Never engage with the stalker (even if this feels safe to do so)

- The aim of the stalker is often to talk with you and build a relationship. Do not respond to their communications, never agree to meet and do not confront them about the stalking.
- Always contact the National Stalking Helpline for advice (see below).

D – Document everything

- Keep a copy of all instances of online stalking - either take a screenshot or print the pages. Try to capture the messages as well as the profile pages (including the user-name) the abuse is coming from. This will be useful evidence in investigation. Suzy Lamplugh Trust's log tool may also be helpful in collecting evidence.³⁰
- If you suspect that an account or device has been hacked or there is malicious software, get specialist help to safely capture the evidence before removing it (contact the Cyber Helpline or the National Stalking Helpline).

E – Expert help

- Get expert help from a specialist stalking charity, such as the National Stalking Helpline, to assist you with advice, support, and robust risk and safety management.
- The Cyber Helpline can also help you with expert advice on cyber security and can assist with assessing the IT capability of the stalker.

R – Report it to the police

- Report stalking behaviours to the police as soon as they start, you can do this directly using 101. If you feel there is any immediate threat to your personal safety dial 999.

S – Secure your devices

- Check the privacy settings on all the devices you own.
- Use a good anti-virus tool, run a malware scan and do software updates on your devices as soon as possible.
- Check devices for unknown apps that may have been installed to share data.

T – Turn off location tagging when you post anything or check in on social media

- Many social media platforms use GPS tracking to tag your location to posts and photos. Go into settings and turn this off.
- Check apps like 'Find my' to ensure you are not sharing your location publicly with people you don't know.

A – Alert those around you so people are aware you are being cyberstalked

- Confide in friends and family for support and encourage them to look at their own online security.
- Ask them to be careful about what they share about you and to not engage with the stalker in any way - it is likely that they will try to contact those close to you.

N – Navigate through the Cyber Helpline's Cyber Stalking Action Plan

- The Cyber Helpline Cyberstalking Action Plan is a methodology to regain your online privacy, security and confidence.

D – Decrease your online footprint

- Review what personal information exists about you online and remove any unwanted information.
- Google yourself and see if you can find your address, phone number or places where you regularly spend time. When you find it contact the website owner and ask them to remove the content.
- Remove yourself from the public listing of the electoral register and ensure your phone number is ex-directory.

³⁰ <https://www.suzylamplugh.org/forms/how-to-record-incidents-and-collect-evidence-leaflet>

ANNEX A: ABOUT

Suzy Lamplugh Trust is a national personal safety charity set up after the disappearance of Suzy Lamplugh over 30 years ago. Our mission is to reduce the risk of violence and aggression through campaigning, education and support. Suzy Lamplugh Trust runs the National Stalking Helpline, the only stalking helpline service for all victims across the UK. The National Stalking Helpline has received over 36,000 contacts from victims of stalking since its inception in 2010. Suzy Lamplugh Trust campaigns for better protections for victims of violence, aggression and stalking in policy and law.

ANNEX B: METHODOLOGY

Suzy Lamplugh Trust surveyed a total of 111 respondents in March 2021. This pilot study was designed to provide indicative results and suggest directions for future research. Due to the small sample size, it does not aim to provide a fully representative or definitive picture of the complex and ever-changing statistics on stalking behaviours and the experience of victims.

The survey was aimed at anyone who has experienced stalking in the UK, and all participants were informed that their responses would be anonymised. Those who agreed to leave a form of contact were assured that their details would remain confidential.

Of respondents who provided details on age, gender and sexual orientation, over three quarters were between the ages of 25 and 54. 4% identified as Cis Male, 89% Cis Female, with 7% preferring not to say. No respondents identified as Trans or Gender Queer. 85% of respondents stated that their sexual orientation was Heterosexual, 8% Bisexual, 1% as Other sexual orientation, with 6% preferring not to say. 87% of participants identified as from a White background (with 78% identifying as White British), 3% White and Asian, 3% from any other mixed/multiple ethnic background, 1% Indian, 1% Pakistani, 1% Bangladeshi, 1% African, 1% Caribbean, 1% Any other Black background, 1% Turkish & 1% Scottish European.³¹

This report draws data from the National Stalking Helpline. The Helpline has supported over 36,000 victims since its inception in 2010, and it is estimated that we supported around 4,000 victims in 2020 in alone. 79% of the clients identify as female, and we find that 55% of stalkers are ex-intimate partners.

Stalking Protection Orders (SPO) were introduced under the Stalking Protection Act 2019 as an extra tool to protect victims of stalking while the police investigation is ongoing, and which acknowledges the suffering faced by victims. SPOs, which do not require the same burden of evidence as a criminal hearing, are an important step forward in allowing positive requirements to be placed on perpetrators in addition to restrictions, such as attending an intervention programme or handing over devices, thereby providing enhanced protection for victims on a tailored basis. Furthermore, the obligation to apply and pay for Stalking Protection Orders is taken on by the police, thereby reducing the burden on the victim.

³¹ Given rounding to nearest percent, the total percentage sums to slightly over 100%.



0808 802 0300



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www.facebook.com/stalkinghelpline

The National Stalking Helpline is run by Suzy Lamplugh Trust. Calls to the helpline are confidential and free from most telephone networks.

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