

## CASE REPORT

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# A Descriptive Study of Child and Adolescent Obsessional Followers

**REFERENCES:** McCann JT. A descriptive study of child and adolescent obsessional followers. *J Forensic Sci* 2000;45(1): 195–199.

**ABSTRACT:** This study is a preliminary descriptive investigation of the phenomenon of stalking in children and adolescents. Data on offender characteristics, victim characteristics, and stalking patterns were examined in a sample of 13 obsessional followers ranging in age from 9 to 18. Many research findings from investigations on adults who stalk were replicated in this study, including the fact that most stalking offenders are male, most victims are female, and about half of stalking cases involve threats made toward the victim. In addition, the rate of violence was 31% in this sample of juvenile stalking offenders and the most common methods of stalking were physical approach, telephone calls, and letter writing. Some interesting trends in the data emerged which require further study and suggest some differences may exist between juvenile and adult stalking offenders. The results are preliminary and suggest directions for future research.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, stalking, obsessional following, children and adolescents, juveniles

Over the last several years, there has been increasing attention given to the social problem of stalking. Legal definitions of stalking have proliferated since California passed the nation's first anti-stalking law in 1990 (1,2) and currently in the United States there are anti-stalking statutes in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and all federal jurisdictions (3). Despite the number of different anti-stalking laws, there is a good degree of uniformity across all legal definitions of stalking. According to Meloy (4), three elements of stalking definitions include: "(1) a pattern (course of conduct) of behavioral intrusion upon another person that is unwanted; (2) an implicit or explicit threat that is evidenced in the pattern of behavioral intrusion; and (3) as a result of these behavioral intrusions, the person who is threatened experiences reasonable fear (p. 2)."

Another term that has been used to refer to stalking behavior is obsessional following, which Meloy (5) defines as "an abnormal or long-term pattern of threat or harassment directed toward a specific individual" where a pattern of threat is "more than one overt act of unwanted pursuit of the victim that is perceived by the victim as be-

ing harassing (p. 148)." This definition was intended to be used as a research tool to describe the behavior and intent of the stalking offender, not a clinical diagnosis, as well as a term that avoids the sensationalism often associated with the term stalking.

The social problem of stalking has been shown to be quite prevalent in society. According to a recent collaborative study by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control, 1.4 million people are victims of stalking each year in the United States (6). In addition, 8% of women and 2% of men report being stalked at some time in their lives. Other evidence of the rising prevalence of stalking is the fact that referrals to a criminal court forensic psychiatric clinic have risen for stalking offenses (7) and stalking is also quite prevalent among college students (8).

Considerable progress has been made in recent years in our understanding of stalking offenders, victims, and the dynamics of stalking behaviors. Meloy and Gothard (9), for example, conducted one of the first studies comparing stalking offenders with other criminal offenders. These researchers found that individuals who stalk tend to be white, older than other offenders (with a mean age of 38), unmarried, and have histories of poor adjustment in intimate relationships and poor work adjustment. Zona, Sharma, and Lane (10) identified three major subtypes of stalking offenders, including the erotomaniac, love obsessional, and simple obsessional followers. Various types of psychopathology have also been identified among stalking offenders, including delusional disorders, schizophrenia, substance abuse, mood disorders, and personality disorders, with Axis II disorders other than antisocial being more common (9–14). Moreover, there is a wide range of behaviors that obsessional followers exhibit as part of their stalking, including telephone calls, letter writing, physical approach, threatening, vandalism, and unwanted sexual advances (12,13). In a review of the stalking literature, Meloy (5) found that about one-half of stalking offenders threaten their victims and 25 to 35% of stalking offenders engage in an act of violence. The homicide rate for stalking offenses was less than 2% in all cases reviewed by Meloy.

What is noteworthy about the stalking literature is that all empirical studies have focused on adult offenders, despite evidence that stalking is perpetrated by juveniles. For example, Urbach, Khalily, and Mitchell (15) reported on the case of a 13-year-old female who had erotomaniac delusions about a teacher and physician that resulted in her repetitively following the victims and making inappropriate comments to them. McCann (16) presented case examples of stalking in adolescents that corresponded to each of the three major subtypes of stalking identified by Zona and his col-

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leagues (10). Furthermore, one family court study in Massachusetts found that 757 restraining orders were issued over a 10-month period against juvenile offenders for threatening, stalking, and harassing behavior (17). Another study on sexual harassment in American schools by the American Association of University Women (18) also provides evidence that stalking may be a subset of sexually harassing behavior in schools. With 81% of students reporting that they had been sexually harassed at some point in their school careers, 7% of victims reported being spied on, 37% reported being the target of rumors, 23% reported staying away from familiar places to avoid their harasser, and 10% had significantly changed their routine by avoiding school or changing the way they went home from school. These findings point to high levels of repetitive harassment among school-age children and adolescents that is severe enough to result in significant changes in routine and lifestyle.

There are additional factors suggesting that stalking among children and adolescents is an important area of study. Although it remains unclear the extent to which stalking occurs in young people, even if a majority of stalking offenders and victims are adults, the study of stalking in children and adolescents can provide important information on the developmental antecedents of stalking behavior that could improve efforts at early identification, treatment, prevention, and risk management. Stalking has been conceptualized as a disturbance of attachment in which obsessional following is motivated by intense and volatile emotions that result when the pursuer's emotional attachment to the object is much greater than the object's attachment to the pursuer (4,5,19). Support for stalking as a pathology of attachment is found in the work of Kienlen (11,20). The attachment histories of stalking offenders often reveal loss of a significant attachment figure early in the offender's life, with another significant loss such as divorce, separation, estrangement, job loss, or rejection preceding the onset of stalking. Therefore, it is conceivable that attachment problems in children and adolescents may rise to the level of stalking.

This paper provides the first report of empirical data on the characteristics of child and adolescent obsessional followers. As noted by McCann (16), it is unclear how rare or common stalking is among children and adolescents. Moreover, because juvenile court records are less accessible due to confidentiality issues and juvenile stalking may not be properly identified given the relative recency with which stalking has been studied in general, access to an adequate sample size may be difficult. Therefore, the present study represents a descriptive study of a small sample of juvenile stalking offenders. The purpose of this study is to provide some initial data on the characteristics of juvenile obsessional followers, their victims, and the dynamics of stalking behavior among young offenders.

## Method

### *Subjects*

The subjects for this study were drawn from three primary sources, including the author's clinical files, published cases of child or adolescent stalking in the professional literature, and media reports of stalking by a child or adolescent. To facilitate the identification of suitable cases, a computerized literature search was conducted on PsychInfo, LEXIS/NEXIS, and Medline databases whereby stalking was used as the primary keyword that was linked with secondary words such as child, adolescent, and juvenile. Also, an informal review of recent forensic mental health

journals was undertaken to identify published cases of juvenile offenders where stalking or obsessional following was present. Meloy's (4) definition of obsessional following was used to determine whether or not a case met criteria as a stalking case.

The search resulted in the identification of 13 cases of stalking by a child or adolescent that represent a nonrandom sample of convenience. Of these cases, five were taken from the authors clinical and forensic files, four (4) cases were identified in the professional literature, and four cases were identified in detailed newspaper articles. The case data and corresponding source where the case was found are listed in Table 1.

### *Procedures*

Once the cases were determined to meet the definition of obsessional following, three general types of information were sought in each case. The first type of data collected was offender characteristics, including age, gender, and race of the obsessional follower. Although clinical information such as "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV" (21) Axis I and Axis II diagnoses were sought, only some case descriptions provided sufficient information to generate a diagnosis. Therefore, the clinical data are incomplete.

The second type of data that was obtained from case descriptions was victim characteristics, including relationship of the victim to the offender, the victim's gender, and the relative age (i.e., adult or peer) of the victim. In each case, there was also sufficient information to determine whether the stalking offender targeted one or more victims. It is important to note that in previous studies on stalking, three general classes of victims have been identified (4, 22). These include prior intimate sexual partners, prior acquaintances, and strangers. In the present study, one case of stalking by an adolescent involved a victim who was the offender's parent. This offender-victim relationship is somewhat unique to juvenile stalking and could be classified under intimate partners where there is a non-sexual relationship between perpetrator and victim. Moreover, there is a risk of incorrectly classifying oppositional, harassing, and threatening behavior of children and adolescents directed toward parents as stalking, when it may instead represent a general pattern of family conflict. Therefore, strict criteria were adopted for this study when harassing behavior of a child or adolescent was directed toward a parent. These criteria included the fact that there first had to be a repetitive pattern of threatening or harassing behavior directed toward one parent that met the definition of obsessional following. Second, some family court or legal intervention had to have been taken specifically in response to the threatening behavior; in the case included in this study, the parent (mother) had taken out an order of protection against her son as a result of his threatening behavior. A third criterion for classification was that the harassing behavior had to have occurred during a period when the parent and the child were living apart. In this study, the teenager had continued to harass his mother in violation of the court order while placed outside of the home. Although these requirements are strict, they provide some protection against inaccurately identifying conflict that occurs between a child and his or her parent as stalking or obsessional following.

Finally, data on the dynamics of the stalking behavior were collected, including the type of behavior the child or adolescent used to stalk his or her victim and the motivation for stalking. In addition, data on whether or not the obsessional following involved a direct threat to the victim and whether or not an act of violence occurred were also documented.

TABLE 1—Clinical and behavioral characteristics of child and adolescent obsessive followers.

Case	Offender Characteristics					Victim Characteristics			Stalking Dynamics		
	Age	Gender	Race	Axis I	Axis II	Relationship	Age	Gender	Behavior/Motivation	Threat	Violence
1*	13	F	Black	Delusional Disorder	Borderline IQ	Teacher	Adult	F	Letter Writing; Sexual Advances	Yes	Yes
2†	16	M	Black	Conduct Disorder	Schizoid Traits	Physician	Adult	F	Physical Approach; Sexual Advances	No	No
3‡	15	M	White	Conduct Disorder	Borderline PD	Ex-girlfriend	Peer	F	Physical Approach; Unwanted Contact	Yes	No
4‡	15	M	White	Paranoid Schiz.	None	Classmates	Peers	F	Letter Writing; Sexual Comments	No	No
5§	14	M	White	ADHD/Substance Ab.	None	Acquaintance	Peer	F	Physical Approach; Property Theft	No	No
6	9	M	N/A	N/A	N/A	Classmate	Peer	F	Telephone Calls; Sexual Advances	No	No
7	10	M	N/A	N/A	N/A	Acquaintance	Peer	F	Vandalism; Physical Approach	Yes	Yes
8†	13	M	N/A	Conduct Disorder	None	Stranger	Adult	M	Physical Approach	Yes	No
9†	15	M	N/A	Conduct Disorder	None	Parent	Adult	F	Threats; Harassment	Yes	Yes
10¶	17	M	N/A	N/A	N/A	Stranger	Adult	F	Physical Approach	No	No
11**	17	M	N/A	N/A	N/A	Acquaintance	Peer	F	Physical Approach; Kept File and Notes	Yes	No
12††	11	M	N/A	N/A	N/A	Classmates	Peers	F	Physical Approach; Sexual Touching	Yes	Yes
13‡‡	18	M	N/A	N/A	N/A	Teacher	Adult	F	Telephone Calls; Revenge	Yes	No

\* Source: Urbach, Khalily, & Mitchell (15).

† Source: author's clinical files.

‡ Source: McCann (16).

§ Source: Johnson & Becker (24).

|| Source: Snow (25).

¶ Source: Frederick (26).

\*\* Source: Glod & Nakamura (27).

†† Source: Brown (28).

‡‡ Source: Meinhardt (29).

## Results

### Offender Characteristics

The average age of this sample of juvenile obsessive followers was 14.1 years, with the youngest subject being nine years of age and the oldest being 18 years of age. Moreover, a majority of the sample was male, with the gender ratio being 12:1 of males to females. Race could not be identified for six of the cases, while the seven remaining cases had representations of white (4) and African-American (3) subjects.

Clinical diagnoses were available for seven of the cases, but the small sample size limits any conclusions that can be drawn about the prevalence of various diagnoses that may be present in juvenile obsessive followers. There are representations on Axis I of conduct disorder, schizophrenia, substance abuse, delusional disorder, and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder. On Axis II, one case had prominent schizoid personality traits and another had a borderline personality disorder with paranoid traits.

### Victim Characteristics

In two of the thirteen cases, a single obsessive follower had more than one victim. All but one of the victims were female and the relative ages of victims were evenly distributed between adults and peers. The relationship each offender had to his or her victim includes ex-girlfriend, classmates, strangers, teachers, and even one case involving a parent as victim. If Meloy's (4) three types of stalking victims are adopted, namely prior intimate partners, acquaintances, and strangers, the following percentages were ob-

tained: intimate partners (14%), acquaintances (64%), and strangers (21%). Interestingly, one case involving a teenager who obsessively harassed his mother was classified as prior intimate partner because the perpetrator-victim relationship involved a close live-in relationship that was non-sexual and involved many of the emotional ties that characterize the relationship of people who live together. This relationship was more intimate than a casual acquaintance, such as co-workers, but admittedly differed from the prototypic relationship between former intimate partners where there is often a prior sexual relationship. This unique case suggests that a slight modification in how prior intimate partners are conceptualized as a victim class may need to be modified and more liberally defined to include parents, siblings, children, or other family members when looking at stalking in juvenile populations.

### Stalking Dynamics

A survey of the juvenile stalking cases in Table 1 reveals that many of the behaviors used to stalk victims found in adult cases are also found in juvenile cases. In some instances, more than one form of stalking behavior was observed in a single case. The most common method of stalking in this sample of juveniles was physical approach toward the victim (7 cases), with other forms of stalking observed to include making unwanted sexual advances (5 cases), telephone calls (2 cases), letter writing (2 cases), vandalism (1 case), and unwanted physical touching (1 case). Although a clear motive for stalking could not be identified in some cases, a number of cases were motivated by the desire for sexual contact with the victim (5 cases), while others were motivated by revenge or anger

(3 cases). Of the thirteen juvenile obsessional followers in this sample, eight (62%) made a direct or explicit threat toward the victim and four (31%) committed an act of violence toward the victim. Of the four who were violent, three (3) physically assaulted the victim and one (1) used a weapon (knife) to attack his victim. Although no third parties were attacked, at least one case involved a threat to a third party—the offender's parents who were viewed as hindering his access to the victim. None of the cases in this study involved a homicide.

## Discussion

This study represents an initial attempt to obtain data on the offender and victim characteristics and dynamics of children and adolescents who engage in stalking, or obsessional following. The sample is quite small and the data available in some cases are absent or limited, thus preventing specific generalizations to be made. However, there are many general findings in the present study which parallel empirical findings that have been observed in the stalking research on adult populations.

More specifically, most of the obsessional followers in this study were male and most of the victims were female. This finding is consistent with research on stalking in adult populations which shows that most stalking offenders are male and most victims are female (4,5). Likewise, just over half of the juvenile obsessional followers in this study (8 out of 13) made a direct or explicit threat toward the victim, which again parallels the finding in adult populations that at least one-half of stalkers explicitly threaten their victims (4). The rate of actual violence in this study was 31%, which is within the 25–35% range of reported violence in stalking cases that has been found in adult samples (4). In addition, the most common methods for stalking in adult populations include physical approach, telephoning, and letter writing (4,5). Again, the findings from this study of juvenile stalking offenders parallels findings in adult populations in that physical approach, telephoning, and letter writing were the major methods children and adolescents in this study used to stalk their victims. Despite the fact that the sample size was small, the consistency of findings between this study and those obtained in adult populations is encouraging and supports the observation made in case studies that stalking is manifest in children and adolescents.

Although some findings from this study are consistent with results from studies on adult stalking offenders, there are some trends in the data that require further study. For instance, other demographic characteristics such as race, educational status, and current family constellation were missing in many case reports and thus more formal study of juvenile stalking offenders is required to further elucidate the clinical and demographic characteristics of child and adolescent stalking offenders. Also, the diagnostic data are scant and requires more formal investigation. It is interesting to note that the limited data in this study suggests that a variety of psychopathology is present in juvenile stalking offenders. Some cases involved stalking guided by delusions and psychotic thinking whereas others involved serious personality disturbances. Moreover, four of the cases involved adolescents with a conduct disorder diagnosis. While this form of psychopathology has often been viewed as a precursor to adult antisocial personality disorder (21), adult stalking offenders have been shown to have character pathology that involves a lower prevalence of antisocial personality disorder compared to other criminal offenders (9). Nevertheless, the presence of conduct disorder in children and adolescents does not guarantee antisocial personality disorder in adulthood, as a sub-

stantial portion of conduct disturbances are limited to childhood and adolescence and do not develop into an adult criminal personality type (23). Therefore, conduct disorder in this sample of juvenile obsessional followers may represent a behavioral presentation, rather than an antisocial or psychopathic personality style (16). This hypothesis warrants further longitudinal study, but the results of this study do not necessarily support the conclusion that the presence of conduct disorder in juvenile obsessional followers implies an antisocial personality disturbance. In fact, where Axis II pathology was diagnosed in this sample, there was likely to be personality traits or disturbances other than antisocial, which is consistent with the findings from studies on adult populations.

Some interesting findings in this study that require cross-validation include a number of victim characteristics and victim-perpetrator interactions. In this study, there was a fairly even split between same-age peers and adults as victims of juvenile obsessional followers. In future studies with larger samples, it would be interesting to compare juvenile stalking offenders who target same-age peers and those who target adults to see if any meaningful differences emerge on variables such as the motives for stalking, patterns of pursuit, rate of violence, and other such variables. At this point, the present study merely supports a finding that the range of victim ages and victim characteristics is broad among juvenile stalking offenders and further research is necessary to identify whether any victim variables are associated with a greater risk of violence.

Another trend noted in the data that requires further study is the large proportion of cases involving unwanted sexual advances as a common method of pursuit. Meloy (4) has noted that the most common form of stalking in adults is obsessional males who stalk prior sexually intimate partners. However, in this study, only one case involved this specific pattern. The most common form of stalking in this study involved unwanted sexual advances directed at either classmates/peers or an adult; these victims would fall into the acquaintance class of victims, rather than prior intimate partners. This finding raises an interesting set of hypotheses that can be explored in future studies. More specifically, the difference in psychosexual development that exists between adults and adolescents may result in different patterns of stalking in these two age groups. Because adolescence is a period of identity formation, sexual exploration, and developing capacity for greater intimacy, it may be that disruptions in attachment that produce stalking behavior may be more evident in how a juvenile obsessional follower relates to casual acquaintances, rather than intimate partners. Again, this hypothesis requires further study but it may be useful for explaining any differences in victim types that exist between adult and juvenile populations.

A final question raised by the results of this study is: What is the earliest stage of development during which stalking can begin? In this study, the youngest stalking offender was nine years of age and involved a boy who made over 200 telephone calls to a girl in his class that included sexual comments and unwanted advances. This case raises questions as to what level of cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and behavioral development is necessary before a child can engage in a pattern of genuine stalking or obsessional following. The answer to this question is likely to be complex and will require input from several different theoretical approaches to understanding human development.

This descriptive study of juvenile obsessional followers is intended to provide some preliminary findings on the phenomenon of stalking in children and adolescents. Because the sample is one of convenience and small, the findings require cross-validation on larger samples and do not permit broad generalizations to be drawn

from the data. On the other hand, the criteria for selecting cases were conservative and all cases were selected from clinical case files, published cases studies, and published media reports. As such, all of the juvenile stalking offenders in this study had involvement with either the mental health or criminal justice system as a result of their stalking behavior. Therefore, these cases represent clear instances of obsessive following by a child or adolescent. Although many questions are raised that require further study, the results from this study lend further support to the finding that stalking occurs in children and adolescents and that some characteristics and dynamics found in adult stalking cases are also found in juvenile stalking cases.

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