

*Frontline Response: Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on stalking behaviours*

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**Abstract**

COVID-19 pandemic lockdown changed the way in which we engage with others and our ability to enjoy free movement away from the confinement of our own homes. Whilst this dramatic change affected everyone, it constituted something much more threatening for victims of stalking, repeatedly targeted by those with an obsessive and fixated behaviour. Whilst we know more about the impact of lockdown stalking behaviour, very little is known about how the police and frontline workers are responding to this challenge. This research aims to increase an understanding of stalking in this context. Firstly, it presents a quantitative examination of recorded data on stalking offences provided by all 43 police forces across England and Wales. In addition, it explores the experiences of those working on the frontline who respond to reports of stalking made by victims. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve police officers from three forces in England, as well as three advocates of victims from two national stalking services. Analyses show that stalking behaviour has increased and evolved to use accessible channels alongside the COVID restrictions. In conclusion, considerable pressure has been placed on frontline workers to adapt and respond not only to increased incidents but also the changes in the nature of stalking behaviour.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, stalking, policing, lockdown, risk, violence, abuse

### **Introduction**

The crisis of COVID-19 necessitated changes in behaviour across every aspect of life. Social interaction shifted to small social “bubbles” and online platforms. The restrictions on social activity, as well as limiting our access to social support, have an impact on the quality of social relationships, such as a decrease in feelings of friendship and increase in feelings of loneliness (Philpot et al, 2021). In times of crisis, the role of social support, as a coping mechanism, has long been recognised to be a positive protective factor, (Saltzman, Hansel and Bordnick, 2020). However, the national rules of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic and self-isolation meant that the usual social support accessed by victims of persistent stalking was dramatically reduced, making victims of stalking feel even more vulnerable (Bracewell, Hargreaves & Stanley, 2020). Evidence shows that calls to the National Stalking Helpline have risen (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2021: 3). These included calls from victims stalked both online and offline, by ex-intimate partners or by those who they had not been in relationships with.

An early report of the consequences of COVID-19 on stalking victimisation (Bracewell et al, 2020) indicated that vulnerability of victims had increased due to lockdown restrictions, resulting in them feeling ‘imprisoned’ and unsafe in their own homes. Furthermore, being restricted at home, it became easier for offenders to monitor and approach their targets, both proximally and through the assistance of technological means. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2021) reported an increase in the stalking behaviours experienced by victims and changes in stalking behaviour in the year ending April 2021. For people victimised by stalking prior to lockdown, 49 percent confirmed an increase in online behaviours and 32 percent also saw a rise in offline behaviours. Changes in the patterns of stalking behaviour present new challenges for advocates and frontline police officers, emphasising the necessity not only to understand the changing landscape from their perspective but also how they police and respond to stalking behaviours.

## Background

Stalking is defined variously by social sciences and in law. While definitions differ, the concepts of repeated and persistent behaviours, as a course of conduct, and the victim's fear, remain central to any definition (Fox, Nobles and Fisher, 2011; Tjaden, 2009). A generally accepted definition in the UK is “a pattern of fixated and obsessive behaviour, which is repeated, intrusive and causes fear of violence or engenders alarm and distress in the victim” (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2021). However, definitions of stalking may vary depending on whether the focus is on the conduct of the perpetrator or on stalking victimisation.

The components of stalking offences found in legislation are largely similar in jurisdictions that do recognise stalking as a criminal offence, however legal definitions of stalking offences vary. Purcell et al (2004) have highlighted that whereas the UK *Protection from Harassment Act (PHA)* is predicated on whether a victim has experienced fear due to a course of conduct equating to harassment, a number of U.S. jurisdictions and all Australian states use a codified list of designated acts that constitute “stalking behaviours”. In the UK stalking is listed under the *Protection of Freedoms Act 2012*, which created two new offences of stalking via amendment to the PHA 1997. There is no legal definition of stalking in the legislation, but stalking is identified as repeated persistent behaviours of harassment which involve a course of conduct that creates a fear of violence in an individual and amounts to stalking under section 2A, or creates serious alarm and distress, but does not reach the threshold for fearing violence under section 4A. The legislation specifically identifies that “the effect of such behaviour is to curtail a victim's freedom, leaving them feeling that they constantly have to be careful” (Crown Prosecution Service, 2018).

In 2020, the national Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) revealed that the prevalence of stalking had significantly increased from 444,054 police recorded offences in the year ending March

2019 (ONS, 2019) to 588,973 in December 2020 (ONS, 2021). This timeframe spans the period of the pandemic lockdown, however COVID-19 cannot be treated as the singular explanatory factor for this rise. A factor which may have had an additional impact is the change in the counting rules, which included the requirement for all ex-partner cases of harassment to be recorded as stalking offences, unless the responding officers felt satisfied that the criteria for stalking offences was not met. Further examination of 2019 CSEW findings indicated that stalking was very much a gendered crime, as the responses revealed that about one in ten men and one in five women reported to have experienced stalking since they were 16 years old.

Researchers from a broad spectrum of academic disciplines have considered and developed their own typologies which reflect the functions of the services they represent, be they oriented toward perpetrator management or victim support. In 1998, Zona, Palarea and Lane developed their own stalker-victim typology based on 74 stalking cases which had been referred to the police and assessed to exhibit obsessional behaviours. This typology was formulated from a scientific, psychological perspective in which the investigators divided stalking typologies into three separate categories: the simple obsessional, the love obsessional and, finally, the erotomaniac. Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan and Williams (2006) developed the RECON typology, so called because allocation to type is based on existence of prior relationship and the context in which stalking occurred. The typology was tested for reliability and validity on a sample of 1005 of stalking cases that was made available to the researchers by a variety of prosecutorial services. The confirmed categories were Type 1, where a previous relationship has existed, and is further divided into intimate and acquaintance subtypes; and Type 2, where no prior relationship existed, split into public figure and private stranger categories. Mullen et al (1999), based on an examination of 145 convicted stalkers that had been referred to a psychiatric unit, suggested there was, in fact, five stalking typologies: rejected, intimacy seeking, incompetent suiters, resentful and predatory. In 2002

Spitzberg conducted a meta-analysis that produced “The Tactical Topography of Stalking Victimisation and Management”. The study analysed samples drawn from clinical/forensic populations, the general population, and college populations, making it one of the most broadly representative studies to date. Spitzberg identified the tactics employed by stalkers to present a tactical profile of stalking. The resulting seven stalking strategies were: hyper intimacy, pursuit, proximity and surveillance, invasion, proxy pursuit and invasion, intimidation and harassment, coercion and constraint and, finally, aggression. From the analysis it was also found that most stalking cases had been preceded by a prior intimate relationship and that where that relationship had been a sexual one, stalking had a greater risk of violence than in nonintimate relationships.

A more recent publication from the National Stalking Clinic applied Mullen et al’s typology and determined that, in line with previous research (Spitzberg, 2002, Mullen 1999), the most prevalent type of stalking (47 percent) could be categorised as ex-intimate partners, fulfilling the criteria for ‘rejected’ stalkers. The next largest group were intimacy seekers (36 percent), who are those believing themselves to be in a relationship despite there being no evidence of one existing. Next were the resentful stalkers (13 percent), who perceive they have been subjected to injustice which they seek to right (Henley, Underwood and Farnham, 2020). These figures are drawn from the population of individuals referred to the National Stalking Clinic by professionals within the mental health and criminal justice fields and reflect similar proportions to figures reported by victim services (Bracewell, Hargreaves & Stanley, 2020 Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2021).

The literature indicates that stalking by ex-intimates continues to be the most common typology reflecting the relationship between offender and victim and is reflected in policing initiatives such as the recent changes made to counting rules. However, this narrow focus may have a detrimental effect on the attention being paid to other forms of stalking behaviours, which also carry with them

a degree of violent risk. Research conducted by Sheridan and Roberts (2011) and McEwan et al (2009) produced findings that supported this. Both found that preoccupation with ex-intimate status as a predictor of stalking-related violence in the literature could mean that there was less attention on, and subsequently less understanding of, the risks posed by other typologies of stalker, such as acquaintances, strangers and/or professional colleagues. By not focusing more on victims of stalking, their vulnerability to harm increases (Sheridan & Roberts, 2011; Flowers, 2019), with profound consequences for their physical, psychological, emotional, social and occupational well-being (Korkodeilieu, 2017; Worsley et al, 2017). The effects of stalking are widespread and can have tragic consequences for all those involved (HMICFRS, 2017). In a 2017 study of 358 homicides conducted by Monckton-Smith et al, stalking was found to have been involved in 94 percent of all cases. In cases where physical violence does not occur, the impact of prolonged victimisation is associated with psychological harm, and other financial, social and losses that affect well-being and functioning (Westrup et al 1999, McEwan, Mullen and Purcell 2006). Digital victimisation in stalking has also been found to be psychologically harmful (Short et al, 2015), and to create a sense of constant threat (Yardley, 2020; Short, 2014) with advancements in technology meaning that it is now easier than ever to access the lives of others, even into their homes.

### **The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and its impacts**

Modern diversification of stalking has been prevalent during the pandemic — a period where both victims and their stalkers were restricted in their movements. Since March 2020, there has been a considerable degree of media attention acknowledging the risks that stalking presents to its victims. Many articles on the subject describe stalking victims as being ‘*sitting ducks*’, a term used by victims’ support service Paladin in a 2020 newspaper report (Grierson,2020). This powerful phrase was also used by one of the victims who participated in research conducted by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2021). Describing her relationship with her perpetrator, they stated:

*“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 [...]. 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.”* (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2021: 4)

Such a vivid description of the vulnerabilities posed to victims of both stalking and domestic violence prompted the government to respond by providing an exemption from social isolation for victims of domestic violence, allowing them to leave their homes (Bracewell et al, 2020). The police, Paladin and The Suzy Lamplugh Trust all reported a surge in the number of reported stalking and harassment offences during the COVID-19 lockdowns and, particularly, reports related to cyberstalking behaviours (Grierson, 2020). Despite the police initiating a national Stalking Awareness Week, advocacy agencies disputed whether they were doing enough. A recent study conducted by Bracewell et al (2020) used semi-structured interviews with 15 stalking victims, conducted by five Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworkers (ISACs), to explore the impact of COVID-19 on their perceived level of risk, the nature of stalking behaviour and police responses. To build upon this, this study examines the perspective of police officers and compares that to the perceived changes to stalking during the lockdown, in order to determine whether there are differences in how the police and advocacy services have experienced it first-hand.

## **Methods**

The aim of this research is to explore the issue of stalking in the United Kingdom and how frontline police officers respond to such crimes. This research utilised data collected as part of a



project on stalking that was funded by the College of Policing, and carried out during the Covid-19 lockdown pandemic between October 2020 and April 2021. A mixed method approach was applied to enable police officers and key stakeholders' views to be at the heart of the research, whilst ensuring that quantitative and qualitative elements of the work enhance and supplement the other.

This study consisted of two phases of data collection and analysis. The first phase involved a quantitative examination of published crime recorded data provided by all 43 police forces across England and Wales to the Home Office and Ministry of Justice. The data was a part of crime reports which accounted for all recorded crimes over the past seven years. All stalking offences coded under Home Office crime code 8Q were extracted and analysed to determine the prevalence of stalking. This time period included the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period but was not representative of a full year of recorded data, as only three out of the four quarters was available at the time of publication. Therefore, the figures for the 2020/21 year are an under-representation of the expected total figure.

Furthermore, twelve (N=12) one-hour long, interviews were conducted with serving police officers and an additional three (N=3) were carried out with advocates currently working with victims of stalking. The police officers who featured in this study were randomly selected from an anonymised list of 40, the only stipulation being that all must have responded to an incident of stalking during the pandemic lockdown. No other information regarding the officer (e.g. their gender age, ethnicity or length of service and seniority) was revealed to the researchers. The purpose of this was to remove any selection bias from the process. From the interviews, which amassed over fifteen-hours of recorded and transcribed content, 739 codes were applied. These codes were created out of the themes which were present within the responses to the twelve predetermined interview questions, and within general, more expanded discussion. The purpose of conducting these interviews was to

bring to the study both police and non-police perspectives on stalking and, where appropriate, engagement with the police. Furthermore, the interviews with stakeholders allowed for greater exploration of how the phenomenon of cyberstalking was carried out during the unique period of COVID-19.

The officers chosen for the interview were randomly selected from a total pool of service numbers provided by each force, with a prerequisite being that all of the officers included in said pool had experience responding to a reported incidence of stalking. The additional in-depth interviews were with the advocacy and support services which included three senior Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworkers (ISACs). The interviews were conducted between January and April 2021. All interviewees were asked to reflect on the impact of the pandemic on stalking and to consider its prevalence, offenders' behaviour and victims' experience. Furthermore, respondents were asked to identify any changes reported in prevalence of stalking, pattern of behaviour and challenges they experienced during the pandemic. These coded responses were then compared and contrasted between police officer responses and ISAC's responses to determine whether there was a perceived difference in the prevalence, behaviour or victimology during the pandemic lockdown.

Due to the COVID-19 risks and restrictions all interviews were conducted via teleconferencing software Zoom and immediately transcribed through the platform. The responses were then uploaded onto the thematic analysis platform Dedoose, which is a double encrypted tool used by academic and professional research services. The uploaded transcripts were coded within three overarching themes:

- **Prevalence** (The perceived rate of stalking behaviours experience by the interviewee in order to determine whether they believe there to have been an increase or decrease during the pandemic lockdown).
- **Behavioural change** (The perceived change in the nature of offender stalking *modus operandi* during the pandemic lockdown).
- **Frontline response challenges** (The challenges in responding to reports of stalking offences as a product of the pandemic lockdown).

These coded responses were then compared and contrasted between police officer responses and ISAC's responses to determine whether there was a perceived difference in the prevalence, behaviour or need for operational change as a response to the frontline challenges during the pandemic lockdown. The purpose of this process was to determine if experiences of stalking were shared, as well as if victim advocacy services felt that the needs of the victims were being met as a consequence of the challenges posed by the pandemic lockdown, and the capability of the police to adapt to the diversification of the behaviours of stalkers and victims.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All research materials were designed by the academic research team, approved by the College of Policing, and conformed to ethical guidance of the British Psychological Society, British Sociological Association and Health and Care Professions Council. Each research stage was approved through the authors' academic institutional ethics process.

### **Results**

### Police recorded data

Police recorded data from all 43 police forces in England and Wales was collated and analysed on Excel, revealing there to have been a significant increase in the number of recorded stalking offences over the last seven years (Figure 1). This time period included the pandemic lockdown but it is important to acknowledge that the data available ends in December 2020 and therefore only includes three out of the four quarters of the police recorded year timeframe. This means that the final figures for 2020/21 are greater than portrayed in *Figure 1*.

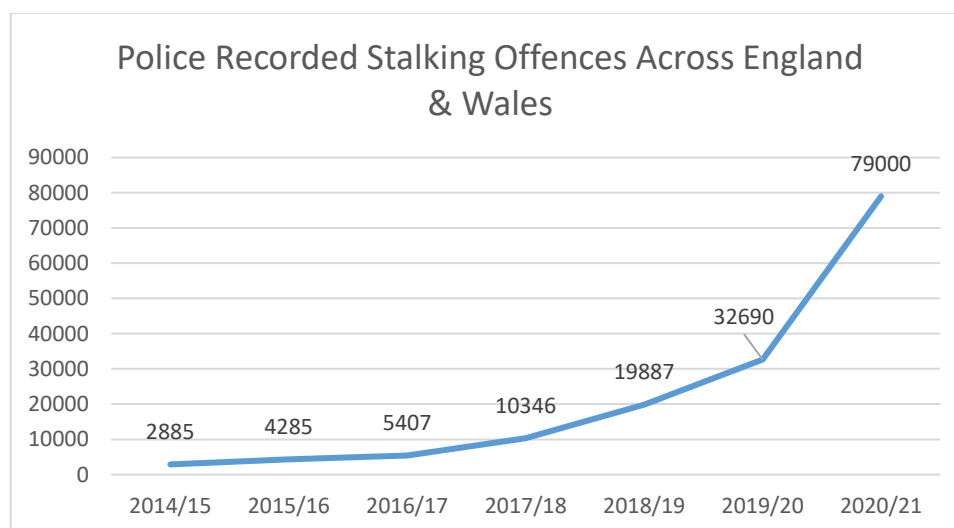


Figure 1: Total number of recorded stalking offences by the police across England & Wales.

It is clear to see from *Figure 1* that there has been a significant increase in the number of police recorded stalking offences across England and Wales over the last seven years, with the most dramatic increase beginning in 2019/20, coinciding with the start of the pandemic. A more in-depth analysis of these figures revealed that overall, in the last five years, there has been a 1744 percent increase in stalking offences recorded by the police across England and Wales. During the pandemic period, between 2019/20 and 2020/21, there was a 142 percent rise in recorded stalking offences. Again, it is important to acknowledge that there is a missing quarter of data, so the figures are much higher than reported, as is the percentage increase listed under-representative. There was also a

change to the counting rules in this period, which stated that all cases of harassment involving ex-partners were to be recorded as stalking unless the police officer believed this not to be the case. This may also have had an impact, as well as the National Stalking Awareness Week run at the beginning of 2020 by the NPCC, which may have led to an increase in calls being reported to the police.

To probe these preliminary findings further, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore the human experience of dealing with stalking, both from the perspective of those required to respond as officers of the law and, additionally, by victims' advocates. These interviews were designed to determine subjects' perspective on the prevalence and *modus operandi* of stalking, whether there has been a diversification during the pandemic and, finally, to determine the challenges faced by those on the frontline in tackling stalking as dangerous crime.

## **The Interviews**

### **Prevalence**

When it came to prevalence, there was a unanimous agreement between police officers and advocacy agencies that stalking had increased during the pandemic lockdown, which is reflective of the police recorded data. Reasons were provided for this perceived increase, with one of which being the impact that mental health and substance abuse has had upon stalking behaviours:

*“I think, because people can't go out and there's been a huge rise in poor mental health. I think that this has prompted people as well to act in ways that they wouldn't ordinarily act because they are really lonely that are acting out of desperation, more so than they ordinarily would.” [Stakeholder ID:3]*

And:

*“People are continuing their drinking behaviours then suddenly obsessing over their ex-partner online. I have seen that whole alcohol fuelled behaviour a few times and they’re diving into cyber stalking.” [Stakeholder ID:3]*

### **Behavioural Change**

Once again police officers and agencies agreed that the *modus operandi* of stalking behaviours changed during the lockdown to accommodate the restrictions of movement, with considerable emphasis placed on proliferation through the use of technology, such as:

*“Let's face it. It's so much easier to cyber stalk someone than really stalk someone. You can find out more information about them and where they are so it's a more efficient way of stalking someone.” [Officer ID:6]*

Despite a general consensus that cyberstalking had increased during the pandemic lockdown, one officer interviewed did not view there having been a change and highlighted that, if stalkers are fixated on an individual, a lockdown will not serve as an inhibitor to their behaviours:

*“If someone is that obsessed with someone and fixated on them that they want to turn up at their house, something like the pandemic isn't going to stop that. They will just crack on with it like all the people in parks and having house parties and stuff that we've been having to deal with.” [Officer ID:10]*

The themes that emerged in relation to changes in technology-facilitated behaviour included the ‘significant increase’ in cyberstalking, a rise in cases involving ‘revenge porn’, and the increasing use of ‘spyware/CCTV access’ to gain access into victims’ homes. All three stakeholders commented that there had been a significant increase in the use of technology in stalking over recent years and that, particularly during the lockdown, stalking behaviours had diversified, with a reduction in traditional strategies (such as loitering) and a shift to the adoption of online stalking methods. Stakeholders commented on the rise in cyberstalking over the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic specifically, saying:

*“Furlough gave people lot more time to invest in these things [stalking behaviours], and people who weren’t very tech savvy now have lots of time to become tech savvy as well, so it’s opened up a whole new thing that it wasn’t there. We’ve seen a lot more revenge porn.”*

[Stakeholder ID:1]

And:

*“Since lockdown there is an increase in the prevalence of the Internet stalking, and people invading people’s homes and lives through the use of internet connected devices.”*

[Stakeholder ID:3]

New methods identified by stakeholders included stalkers sending gifts, accessing CCTV and Ring doorbells, targeting smart technology devices (such as Amazon’s Alexa), and creating fake social media accounts to surreptitiously befriend and, from there, spy on their victims. In addition, the stakeholders commented that they had seen an increase in revenge porn as an element of stalking,

some of which was conducted by ex-intimates, but also by strangers selling personal content, such as photos from social media, and selling them on popular platforms including OnlyFans:

*“OnlyFans. She [a victim] must have had some images on a social media profiles, either in a bikini or underwear or something like that, and a perpetrator she didn't know set up a whole account selling her images.” [Stakeholder ID:1]*

### **Challenges and improvement needs**

It was noted in the stakeholder interviews that the diversification of digital behaviours has created a challenge for effective policing, as the lack of knowledge around cyberstalking has meant that identifying if a crime had been committed was less clear to officers because it did not fit the classifications of traditional stalking *modus operandi*.

A third challenge that was noted in the interviews conducted relates to offender destabilisation, whereby the psychological impact of the pandemic lockdown has increased the number of people suffering from poor mental health and an increase in substance misuse. One stakeholder noted:

*“I think, because people can't go out, there's been a huge rise in poor mental health. I think that this has prompted people as well to act in ways that they wouldn't ordinarily act because they are really lonely that are acting out of desperation, more so than they ordinarily would.” [Stakeholder ID:3]*

And:

*“People are continuing their drinking behaviours then suddenly obsessing over their ex-partner online. I have seen that whole alcohol-fuelled behaviour a few times and they're diving into cyber stalking.” [Stakeholder ID:3]*



These comments highlight that more needs to be done to protect victims and the risks relating to offender destabilisation (NOMS, 2016). Stalking Protection Orders (SPOs) were introduced shortly before the lockdown began and, whilst SPOs and Interim SPOs are intended provide support for both victims and offenders, a 2021 review of SPOs by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust found that there were several key areas of improvements. The most evident was that the pandemic lockdown had caused a significant delay in court hearings having an impact on stalking cases, particularly SPO hearings. Furthermore, the greatest barrier in obtaining an SPO was police discretion. On numerous occasions, the review revealed that victims were denied the option to request to apply for an SPO in cases where officers felt the victim's evidence was lacking. Finally, victims reported that officers did not respond to breaches of SPOs, leaving victims inadequately protected.

### Discussion

The results of this research illustrate the increase in stalking reports to police during COVID-19 restrictions, and the considerable pressure on frontline workers to adapt and respond to changed context and increased incidents. The pandemic lockdown restricted the movements of individuals and clearly shaped the *modus operandi* employed by stalkers. Stalkers modified, diversified and adapted their behaviour to the victims' (and their own) mandatory confinement. These findings support those reported early in the pandemic (Bracewell et al, 2020) and, later, by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2021). Results also indicate an appetite amongst police officers and advocates for training and support around stalking and cyberstalking behaviours, and the impact these behaviours have on victims. Despite this, entry officers are not taught about stalking, with this lack of consistent, formalised training already identified as an area of weakness by the HMICFR as part of their *Living in Fear* report (2017).

To understand the prevalence of stalking before and during the pandemic to determine the lockdown's impact, data on reported cases were examined. Stalking reports to the police have increased steadily over the last five years, with a significant spike reflected in the cases reported during the pandemic. This may indicate an increase in stalking and/or a rise in awareness due to the increase of case reported by the public to the police, in addition to the fact that reported cases and actual cases can sometimes be at odds (Martellozzo et al, 2021; BBC, 2018). The reluctance to and delay in reporting also remains a barrier to confidence that police data on stalking reports are a fully representative figure, exacerbated by lower reporting across all crimes by people from the Black community. This was highlighted in the National Crime Survey (ONS, 2020) which revealed that there has been a year-on-year decrease in confidence towards the police by the Black community (Gov.uk, 2021). Extrapolation of this trust deficit suggests that the Black community may be less likely to report experiences of stalking to police, with the result potentially placing them at greater risk.

The interviews provided evidence of changes in the experience of frontline workers, they reported a diversification in the modus operandi of stalking during the pandemic lockdown and commented on the impact on the mental health of people engaged in stalking behaviour. Technological enabled behaviours emerged as the main theme of diversification in behaviour, frontline workers commented also on the new skills acquired by stalkers in this area, suggesting that the efficiency and ease of such methods may well remain embedded in a post pandemic modus operandi. Agility and adaption in stalking behaviours has long been identified in research (Korkodeilou, 2020; Quinn-Evans et al, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The primary aims of this study were to understand the prevalence of stalking before and during the pandemic to determine impact; to examine frontline workers' experiences of responding to cases of stalking during the pandemic; to explore whether there has been a diversification in the *modus operandi* of stalking during the pandemic lockdown; and, finally, to assist with identifying barriers to effective responses to stalking during a pandemic through the experiences of frontline response workers.

It emerged from this research that, during the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the number of stalking reports being made to the police, and that the very nature of the pandemic has resulted in victims feeling like '*sitting ducks*' (to borrow a phrase from *Paladin*), due to increasingly invasive behaviours of tech-enabled stalking now being utilised to intimidate victims. The pandemic has shifted the dynamic of how some crimes are perpetrated, leading offenders to upskill and explore alternative methods of accessing victims through technology. Doing so has allowed offenders to target their victims 24 hours a day, in the knowledge that they were confined at home and had less access to friends or family for support. This emerged in the interviews with advocacy workers, who claimed that all stalking cases they dealt with now have a cyber-element to them and that the number of reported cases of intimate image abuse was rapidly increasing.

It is important to acknowledge that whilst this study provides an innovative and much needed contribution to both theory and practice, there were several limitations to the study which must be appreciated. Firstly, the number of qualitative interviews was limited. Despite this phase resulting in over fifteen-hours of content, this research could be developed further by including a greater number of officers and advocacy workers, to remove any concern over selection bias. Whilst the police officers interviewed were randomly selected from an anonymised list of 40, to limit the risk of selection bias, the representatives from the advocacy agencies were not selected using this same process, which should be considered (in some capacity, at least) in future work. The limited number

of interviews conducted, and cases discussed, also raises the possibility of overlooking any of the *benefits* that the lockdown may have had on the investigation of stalking cases. The restrictions placed on individuals in this context may have resulted in offenders engaged in non-proximal means of pursuit that reflect lower immediate risk of harm, as opposed to actions such as physical approaches to the home; further, increased use of electronic communications to contact victims may have left a better trail for investigators. This means the stalker themselves may also be at increased risk of becoming a '*sitting duck*' for the police investigating them, more easily traced (and arrested) by authorities. These possibilities require further examination as data becomes available for the prosecution of cases over the full duration of the pandemic. This data will allow for better appreciation of the impact that lockdown may have had in enhancing police responses to stalking; even if a positive impact is observed in this data, it must be considered in conjunction with the increased fear and distress of victims through the lockdown period as reported here. Whether any benefit that lockdown had to the policing process (minimal or otherwise) can counterbalance its impact on victims is a topic worthy of further exploration.

These new digital methods pose significant challenges to frontline workers when responding to reported cases of stalking, requiring them to have the expert knowledge and the technological capacity to confront these online behaviours, and to understand how victims can establish a greater degree of digital safety. Nevertheless, more optimistically, this also provides increased opportunity to capture the harmful behaviour(s) taking place. Unlike traditional methods of stalking in which there is an emphasis on physical proximity and following of the victim, without leaving any traceable evidence, the online environment allows there to be an evidential trace of the offender's actions (e.g. unwanted messages from traceable numbers sent on social media platforms; sharing of private images).

This study has identified several key areas in which there is room for improvement to the policing of stalking, especially in light of the pandemic lockdown. First, there is the need for a greater degree of nationalised training for frontline workers operating in all advocacy roles, not only organisations specifically tasked with responding to stalking. Stalking, as a recognised criminal justice issue, should also be included in standard training provided for all police officers currently serving, and as a mandatory module in all entry training and qualifications for officers joining the police force. Second, there is the need for further research exploring the experiences of both victims and offenders in this area, as there is still a significant degree of information that remains unknown on the impact of stalking behaviours, as well as the extent to which offender destabilisation contributes to escalation of risk. Whilst this study has provided a significant and impactful first insight into stalking during the pandemic from the perspectives of frontline response workers, it could be strengthened by engaging with those who experienced stalking during this unprecedented period of social and psychological strain.

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