

Teen stalking victims: Analysis of consequences reveals disturbing trends

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Stalking is a widely recognized public health concern, yet little information is available about stalking behaviors among teenage victims. The teen years are a formative period during which boundaries are tested and guidelines of acceptable emotional and sexual behavior are established. A new study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* surveyed 1,236 randomly selected youths and found that 14% of girls and 13% of boys were victims of stalking. Additionally, results of the survey indicated these teens were more likely to report symptoms linked to depression, as well as risky behavior such as binge drinking and sexting.

Using latent profile analysis, investigators were able to break down the survey data and group the teens into three main classes: a non-victim class, a minimal exposure class, and a victim class. Class size was fairly consistent across genders with 50% of girls and 53% of boys falling into the non-victim class, 36% of girls and 34% of boys qualifying for the minimal exposure class, and finally 14% of girls and 13% of boys comprising the victim class.

The survey asked the teens specific questions about the actions of others. Because it's generally agreed that stalking requires a pattern of repeated unwanted behaviors, researchers used a list of 19 stalking victimization indicators and gathered data about how often each one occurred. Teens were then separated into the three classes based on the frequency of exposure.

"Little is actually known about the rates and potential consequences of stalking victimization in developing adolescent populations," said lead investigator Dennis E. Reidy, PhD, Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA. "Identifying how these different stalking tactics manifest in different combinations is critical because different stalking profiles likely confer varying degrees and forms of risk. For instance, a victim primarily experiencing surveillance/monitoring by a stalker may suffer far fewer physical, social, and psychological consequences than a victim of a stalker showing more diversity in stalking behavior."

Once investigators identified the three different classes, they conducted further analysis to ascertain the potential mental and behavioral health factors associated with being a victim of stalking. Along with tracking the stalking indicators, the survey also asked the teens about psychiatric symptoms (mood disorder, post-traumatic stress, feelings of hopelessness), sexual behaviors (number of partners, frequency of sexting, [oral sex](#), and intercourse), and substance use. The data revealed that teens in the victim class were more likely to report mood symptoms and instances of risky behavior than their peers in the minimal exposure or non-victim classes.

"A general trend across boys and girls alike emerged," explained Dr. Reidy. "Adolescents in the victim class reported more psychiatric symptoms during the past month and a higher frequency of physical dating violence victimization, alcohol use, and [binge drinking](#) during the prior 12 months. Additionally, girls in the victim class reported higher prevalence of marijuana use and more sexting and oral sex partners during the past year."

While dating can be awkward for many teens, this new study shows that a sizeable percentage of young people experience repeated behavior that crosses the line. Stalking victimization during the formative adolescent

years can leave lasting mental and behavioral markers. Identifying those most at risk and creating targets for intervention in this vulnerable group may be able to prevent mood disorders, risky sexual behavior, and violence.

"The data suggest a substantial proportion of adolescents are victims of stalking and are likewise at risk for a number of deleterious health outcomes. As such, this population merits further attention by prevention researchers and practitioners," concluded Dr. Reidy.

More information: Dennis E. Reidy et al, Behavioral and Mental Health Correlates of Youth Stalking Victimization, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2016). DOI: [10.1016/j.amepre.2016.08.035](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2016.08.035)

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