



Jan 13, 2:45 PM EST

## Unprecedented US survey tracks scope of stalking

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NEW YORK (AP) -- By the tens of thousands, victims of stalking lose their jobs, flee their homes and fear for their safety, according to a new federal survey providing the most comprehensive data ever on a crime affecting an estimated 3.4 million Americans a year.

About 11 percent of the victims said they had been stalked for five or more years, and one in seven said the stalking compelled them to move out of their home, according to the report by the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. It covered a 12-month period in 2005-06.

The study was described as a groundbreaking effort to analyze the scope and varying forms of stalking, which had not been featured in previous versions of the National Crime Victimization Survey.

The number of victims was up sharply from a more limited 1995-96 study commissioned by the Justice Department that estimated 1.4 million Americans a year were targeted by stalkers. Both surveys concluded that women more than twice as likely to be victimized as men.

In the span between the two surveys, e-mail and text-messaging emerged as common tactics for stalkers.

"The prevalence of these electronic devices gives stalker another tool in his tool kit, makes it easier to stalk and increases victims' fear," said Cindy Dyer, director of the federal Office on Violence Against Women. "It doesn't increase the number of stalking offenders, but it sure makes their job easier."

The Bureau of Justice Statistics defined stalking as a course of conduct, directed at a specific person on at least two separate occasions, that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. The most commonly reported types of stalking were unwanted phone calls (66 percent), unsolicited letters or e-mail (31 percent), or having rumors spread about the victim (36 percent).

More than one-third of the victims reported being followed or spied upon; some said they were tracked by electronic monitoring, listening devices or video cameras. About 21 percent said

they had been attacked by their stalker - with the forms of assault ranging from a slap to rape.

Nearly 75 percent of victims knew their stalker in some capacity - most commonly a former spouse or ex-boyfriend/girlfriend, sometimes a relative or co-worker.

"The public tends to perceive of stalking as something that happens to celebrities who have a stranger follow them around," said report co-author Katrina Baum. "This study tells us that stalking is not a stranger phenomenon."

People who were divorced or separated were more vulnerable to stalking than other marital categories, and those aged 18-24 were more likely to be stalked than older people.

Victims reported suffering a range of emotions because of the stalking. Their most common fears included not knowing what would happen next (46 percent) and fearing the stalking would continue indefinitely (29 percent). Nine percent of the victims said their worst fear was death.

According to the report, about 130,000 victims said they had been fired or asked to leave their job because of problems arising from the stalking. About one in eight of all employed victims lost time from work, either for fear for their safety or to pursue activities such as seeking a restraining order or testifying in court.

Mary Lou Leary, a former federal prosecutor who is executive director of the National Center for Victims of Crime, remarked on the persistence of some of the stalking behavior depicted in the report.

"When you consider the impact that stalking has on a victim's life, five weeks is forever - five years is incredible," she said. "They often have to give up their current life, leave their jobs, their homes, establish a whole new identity."

Leary credited law enforcement authorities with taking stalking seriously, but she said more needs to be done to strengthen anti-stalking laws and expand the resources to combat it.

One step recommended by Dyer was a modification of state laws so stalking victims could more easily obtain protective orders against their stalkers.

The federal government and all 50 states have enacted laws making stalking a crime, but the laws and definitions of stalking vary widely.

The survey's authors tracked a range of stalking behaviors, including waiting for the victim at a certain location, sending unwanted messages or leaving an unwanted present.

"While individually these acts may not be criminal, collectively and repetitively these behaviors may cause a victim to fear for his or her safety or the safety of a family member," the report said.

About 40 percent of the victims reported the stalking to the police, and about one-fifth filed charges.

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On the Net:

Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>

National Center for Victims of Crimes: <http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/Main.aspx>

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