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Martellozzo, Elena ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1249-7611, Bleakley, Paul ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2512-4072, Bradbury, Paula ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7837-7233, Frost, Stewart and Short, Emma (2022)
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Elena Martellozzo (Middlesex University, UK)

Paul Bleakley (New Haven, USA)

Paula Bradbury (Middlesex University, UK)

Stewart Frost (Middlesex University, UK)

Emma Short (De Montfort University, UK)

Police responses to cyberstalking during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK

Abstract

This research aims to explore how police officers responded to cyberstalking during the unprecedented period of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020-April 2021). More specifically, it aims to report the police experience of responding to cases of stalking, including cyberstalking, during this period; to explore officer confidence in identifying cyberstalking and to explore the challenges faced by frontline police. One hundred and two frontline police officers from two forces in the South of England[1] took part in the online survey and, subsequently, ten officers and six key stakeholders each participated in a one-hour qualitative interview. The data indicates that the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted an increase in cyberstalking, and this has been attributed, by both the police and stakeholders, to the lockdown whereby people worked from home, had more time to become *tech savvy* and, as a result, developed digital skills that facilitate cyberstalking. Furthermore, it emerged that there is professional uncertainty among officers surrounding cyberstalking and how to deal with the problem effectively. However, this uncertainty is unquestionably not related to the lack of officers' motivation, but to absence of a stalking screening tool that addresses cyberstalking, accompanied by effective multiagency training that would assist officers to understand the nature of the issue and to respond to it effectively.

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[1] The two British forces were Surrey Police and Sussex Police, which were selected to pilot the Stalking Screening Tool.

Key words: Policing; Cybercrime; Online Stalking; Digital Proximity, Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

Introduction

Though a universal legal definition remains elusive, stalking is most often conceptualised as a course of conduct where an offender shows characteristics of fixation and/or obsession with a victim, reflected in repeated and unwanted attempts to follow, conduct surveillance or otherwise force contact on their chosen target. Despite the lengthy Covid-19 lockdowns imposed in the United Kingdom for much of 2020, reports of stalking rose exponentially over the course of the year: in a three-month period from July 2020 to September 2020, around 163,000 stalking reports were lodged nationwide, an increase of 31 percent on the same time period in the year prior (Shadwell, 2021).[2] Whereas stalking was once seen as an offence that was only carried out in person, social digitisation has seen cyberstalking emerge as an increasingly prevalent factor in the overall landscape of stalking. Cyberstalking, best understood as "repetitive and unwanted communication or contact that is directed toward an individual through electronic means" such as the Internet, social media or smartphone apps (Kaur et al., 2020). Considering the pervasive reach of technology into contemporary lives, cyberstalking poses tangible risks to victims by creating new avenues for fixated and/or obsessive perpetrators to utilise and exploit in their efforts to obtain access to the target of their stalking. Anecdotal reports have suggested that limitations on freedom of movement during the Covid-19 lockdowns prompted a discernible change in the *modus operandi* reported by stalking victims and, specifically, a greater emphasis on the use of digital tools to monitor and force contact with victims (Grierson, 2020).

As the nature of stalking continues to adapt in line with digital technologies, it is essential that the police response to stalking also adjusts to meet the new challenges of cyberstalking. Research conducted across two police forces in the South of England during the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020-April 2021) set out to explore the experience of those frontline police officers responding to reports of stalking, both proximal and cyber. A survey of 102 officers

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[2] This year-on-year comparison is affected by amendments to Home Office counting rules, which changed how stalking is recorded in the United Kingdom. These changes were expected to impact the statistics by increasing the number of stalking cases recorded in the official data.

from these two police forces was supplemented by in-depth interviews with ten frontline police officers, as well as a further six interviews with key stakeholders representing the victim experience of stalking and, more pertinently, the policing of stalking in the United Kingdom. A total of 739 codes were applied based on the interview phase of this research, providing a greater degree of insight into police perspectives on the issue of stalking (including cyberstalking). The results support the position that cyberstalking increased in frequency during the British Covid-19 lockdowns and, as such, presented unfamiliar challenges for frontline police. The data also highlights a deficit in officer confidence in dealing with cyberstalking behaviours, when compared to traditional proximal stalking. The combination of an increase in digitally enabled cyberstalking and lower officer confidence in dealing with such cases is a matter requiring further exploration and, ultimately, action to remedy this professional uncertainty to enhance police service provision.

Explaining cyberstalking

Over the years, digitisation has shaped criminals' *modus operandi*. Although the digital component is not always a necessary condition for a crime to occur (Veenstra et al., 2013: 75–87), being online creates unequalled opportunities that facilitate crimes like stalking, enabling communications and surveillance to be enacted more easily, rapidly, anonymously and at no cost (Martellozzo, 2013). As Jane and Martellozzo (2017: 9) argue, the 'always on', omni-connected nature of modern life means that perpetrators have the potential to target individuals perfidiously.

If the first wave of stalking-related research was somewhat late to emerge in the 1990s, the application of this work to the digital world was much quicker. Since the late 1990s, researchers have sought to identify and classify stalking behaviours in the online world, colloquially referred to as "cyberstalking". J. Reid Meloy, a pioneer in stalking studies, addressed the potential risks of cyberstalking in 1998, describing it as "a paranoid tinged world of malicious and intrusive activity on the Internet" (Meloy, 1998: 10). While a useful early acknowledgement of cyberstalking, Meloy's outline on cyberstalking behaviour was somewhat myopic and (by contemporary standards) underdeveloped, focusing primarily on the use of the Internet to gather information on a victim and to communicate with them. Essentially, Meloy's position was that cyberstalking was ancillary to conventional stalking, rather than distinct. In many respects this is understandable, given the context: when Meloy

was writing, the Internet remained in a fairly rudimentary form, predating the accessibility of the current social media and smartphone era.

Theorising Cyberstalking

The Covid-19 pandemic has revelaed to scholars and practitioners that offenders are able to adapt to challenging situations and to new environments, such as cyberspace, in which they can target victims and offend. Bocij and McFarlane (2002: 31–38) were among the first to define cyberstalking as a distinct course of conduct from its "conventional" equivalent. In their view, cyberstalking differs in both style and substance: for one, "electronic communications technologies also lower the barriers to harassment and threats; a cyber-stalker does not need to physically confront the victim" (2002: 31–38). This lack of physical proximity was defined by John Suler (2002: 411–426) as the online disinhibition effect, after he noticed clear changes in people's behaviour when online. He found that, after several years immersed in online communities, some users disclose inner truths about themselves more freely, as they are less restrained by judgement, and can demonstrate great acts of kindness and generosity towards those they have never met: both positive behaviours. This process is defined by Suler as benign disinhibition, which can be indicative of a desire to better understand oneself. However, when this theory is applied to criminal behaviour, it adopts a negative interpretation, which Suler describes "toxic disinhibition", where some people demonstrate aggressive, threatening online behaviours, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking or abusive rhetoric. He found that some offenders commit acts that they would never, or have never, committed in the 'real world' which are facilitated by the abundance of anonymity available online. It can be viewed as a cathartic process, in which the individual does not seek an element of personal growth, rather a desire to act out unsavoury needs or wants in a blindly compulsive manner, achieved through a disassociation between oneself online and the 'real world self' (Suler, 2004). Without the social cues established through face to face interactions, cyberstalkers may develop a fictional relationship with their victims and become disinhibited to the impact and consequences that their behaviours might have on the victims. This process is also known as 'solipsistic introjection', where the cyberstalker fills the relationship gaps with fantasies which are created unconsciously and with extreme levels of disinhibition. This behaviour creates a narrative in the stalker's head, which bears no resemblance with the relationship with the victim offline.

Bocij and McFarlane (2002: 10) support Suler's theory and warn that this lack of proximity – usually a defining feature of stalking – posed challenges for the policing of stalking and necessitated a new framework for assessing risk in this area, as the characteristics of conventional and online stalking were fundamentally different. Indeed, as argued by Brickell (Brickell, 2017: 43–57), "while the internet may not displace offline identities, inequalities and varied modes of regulations, it does open up new spaces through which <u>power</u> and <u>resistance</u>- including digilantism- can circulate" (Ibid. 2017: 54 emphasis added). Despite Bocij and McFarlane's call for a greater academic understanding of cyberstalking, Sheridan and Grant (2007) observed five years later that "very little empirical work exist[ed] on cyberstalking" (2007: 627) . Their study of 1,051 self-identified stalking victims found that 47.5 percent reported harassment via the Internet, yet only 7.2 percent of the sample were determined to be victims of cyberstalking as a separate offence type (Sheridan and Grant, 2007: 627–640). Despite the finding that the Internet was a factor in almost half of the stalking cases reported in their research, Sheridan and Grant concluded "that online harassment does not necessarily hold broad appeal to stalkers" (Sheridan and Grant, 2007: 627–640). Sheridan and Grant also note that, in their sample, the profile of an online stalker did not differ in any substantive sense from an offline stalker. This is not supported by Barlett and Chan's (2020) theory suggesting that the internet itself affects communication, predisposing individuals to lower empathy, rapid escalation to antisocial behaviour, and adoption of group identities with antisocial traits (2020: 293).

Although it is at first difficult to believe that behaviour so substantively different in form would not be associated with an offender profile that was (at least) equally distinct, more recent empirical research nevertheless supports these early, exploratory findings. In a 2014 study, Cavezza and McEwan (2014: 955–970) conducted a direct comparison between 36 cyberstalking offenders and 36 conventional stalkers, wherein they found "relatively few differences between cyberstalkers and off-line stalkers" apart from minor demographic differences, such as that cyberstalkers were more likely to be ex-intimate partners (75 percent of cyberstalkers versus 47 percent of conventional stalkers) and less likely to approach victims physically (56 percent versus 78 percent) (Cavezza and McEwan, 2014: 955).

In spite of the seemingly broad consensus on the basic comparability of online and off-line stalking, other researchers still maintain that the true nature of cyberstalking remains

unclear. For example, Parsons-Pollard and Moriarty (2009: 435–441) argue that "the differences between the two [offline stalking and cyberstalking] can have a tremendous impact on victims" (Parsons-Pollard and Moriarty, 2009: 435). In their view, the conflation of offline and online stalking is not the result of true comparability, but rather a lack of information due to underreporting and a lack of resources available to law enforcement, when dealing with cyberstalking cases. This latter issue is also one the key findings presented in this study (Anonymous, Forthcoming), which indicates that the police are not equipped nor adequately trained to deal with the increasing numbers of stalking offences. This conclusion effectively builds on foundational work by Bocij (2002: 10), who sampled 169 respondents, finding that a third of this population could be considered victims of cyberstalking. Bocij also found key differences in the characteristics of offending: importantly, his study found that cyberstalking happened over a shorter period of time than conventional stalking and that cyberstalking victims were less likely to know the person targeting them.

Concerningly, Bocij also found that (regardless of a lack of physical proximity) cyberstalking had great potential to instil fear in victims: almost 25 percent of respondents in his survey reported the highest level of distress as a result of their experiences. Drebing et al. (2014: 61–67) observed similar results in their survey of users of a German social networking site, which encompassed a statistically significant sample of 6,379 respondents. This study determined that self-reported victims of cyberstalking recorded poorer results on the World Health Organisation's well-being index, suggesting a negative impact similar to that experienced by victims of conventional stalking. However, Drebing et al. also found that "if stringent definitional criteria comparable to those of offline stalking are applied, it is not a mass phenomenon" (2014: 61). Emma Short and her colleagues surveyed 353 self-defined cyberstalking victims, and the findings revealed that the psychological effect that stalking has on them could be compared to the symptoms seen in PTSD, leaving victims feeling distressed, isolated, and guilty (Short et al., 2015: 23–37; Short et al., 2014: 133–137).

Whether or not cyberstalking is a prevalent social problem remains undetermined in the existing literature, with various studies offering wildly variant perspectives on this fundamental question. While it could be argued that the rapid pace of technological development over recent years has means the digital landscape (and public engagement with technology) changes significantly year-on-year and, thus, accounts for the variance in

prevalence rates, closer examination of the data indicates otherwise. As Kaur et al. (2020: 120188) note, even studies conducted over similar time periods and digital landscapes reflect considerable divergence. Whereas Kraft and Wang's (2012: 113–131) study of college-aged students found a prevalence rate of only 9 percent, a study of an equivalent college-aged sample population two years later from Reyns et al. (2012: 1–25) recorded a prevalence rate of 41 percent. If not a result of characteristically distinct sample populations, other explanations for this variance must be considered, such as sample demographics (especially gender, as men are less likely to be stalked in general) and a lack of awareness about what constitutes cyberstalking among respondents (Smoker and March, 2017: 390–396) (Acquadro Maran and Begotti, 2019). This latter suggestion offers a persuasive explanation for variance in cyberstalking literature.

In their systematic review of existing literature, Kaur et al. (2020: 12) observed "that many cyberstalking victims were initially unaware of their predicament due to limited knowledge of cyberstalking and its harmful consequences" (2020: 12). On this, the extant research bears some level of responsibility for not reaching a consensus on what differentiates cyberstalking as a course of conduct from conventional stalking and, in many cases, underplaying the prevalence and risks of cyberstalking to the extent that research has been (with key exceptions) less developed than they might have been if cyberstalking was recognised sooner as a unique and increasingly-common offence that caused serious harm in the contemporary, digitally-engaged population.

Methodology

Although crime taking place in the digital world is not restricted by geographical boundaries, the aim of this research is to explore the issue of cyberstalking in the United Kingdom and how the two police forces from the South of England, who participated in the research, respond to such crimes. This research utilised data collected during the evaluation of the Stalking Screen Tool (SST) (Anonymous, Forthcoming), which was carried out during the Covid-19 lockdown pandemic, between October 2020 and April 2021, using two British police forces as a pilot. The research aimed to assess the implementation and usability of the tool; to understand how the tool was received by first response officers; to establish if the tool

enables improved identification of stalking by first response officers and to evaluate the consistency in which officers were completing the SSTs and risk management forms. To address these aims, 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.

More specifically, the data presented in this article were extrapolated from the online survey administered to the two forces where N=102 officers responded to the survey. Furthermore, ten (N=10) one-hour long, interviews were conducted with serving police officers and an additional six were carried out with key stakeholders currently working with victims of stalking. From the ten interviews, which amassed over eight 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 non-police' perspectives on stalking and, where appropriate, their engagement with the police. Furthermore, the interviews with stakeholders allowed for exploration of the phenomenon of cyberstalking during the unique period of Covid-19. The data from these two stages of the research are presented here.

Due to the travel restrictions during the pandemic, all interviews were conducted via teleconferencing software Zoom and transcribed through the platform in real time. 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 transcriptions were then thematically coded, clustered and analysed.

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 under Middlesex University ethics processes.

Findings

Police confidence in recognising cyberstalking

The police are considered key players in the fight against cybercrimes (Wall and Williams, 2013). However, there are many challenges that the police have had to face over the years, and these challenges continue to intensify as society becomes more digitalised (Martellozzo, 2015: 32–52). It was critical for this research to explore officers' experience of dealing with (and understanding of) stalking, including cyberstalking, and their ability to identify stalking behaviours, more generally. This dimension was captured in several ways, including the distribution of a quantitative survey that was completed by 102 officers across the two forces and 16 qualitative interviews with operational officers and key stakeholders, working with both offenders and victims.

It was clear from the survey results (TABLE 1) that officers felt confident in their understanding of the distinction between stalking and harassment, as defined under UK law. Ninety-six percent of officers responded that they were either confident or extremely confident in this, with 92 percent of officers stating they also understood the legislation pertaining to both. Further continuing this trend, 94 percent of officers responded that they felt confident or extremely confident in identifying patterns in stalking offending behaviour. Importantly from a safeguarding perspective, a total of 93 percent of officers responded that they were confident in identifying when a case fell into the category of high-risk, and 97 percent were confident that they knew when to refer a stalking case to a supervisor for further action.

Although this could not be tested, 70 percent of officers felt confident in knowing how and when to use stalking-specific powers. These results are, overall, a clear indication that officers in this sample feel confident and knowledgeable in dealing with stalking cases. The lowest confidence rates recorded in this survey involved cyberstalking, where only 61 percent of officers were confident that they understood what the offence constituted, and 69 percent self-reporting an understanding of the risks of cyberstalking.

Officers interviewed commented that the rapidly changing landscape of technology and, as a result, the evolving nature of cyberstalking, was a significant barrier to keeping up with change:

"The cyber element is always changing. You've got watching and spying on the person. You've got monitoring the victim using internet email or any other electronic

communication. But there's probably some behaviours that I missed because I don't know, I don't know the world of stalking." [Officer ID:8]

And:

"It's changing and it's becoming more sophisticated and we, the police are always, three or four steps behind because we always have to play catch up and we're never in front of it." [Officer ID:7]

How confident are you	Extremely confident	Confident	Unconfident	Extremely unconfident
The difference between stalking and harassment	28%	68%	2%	2%
The legislation relating to stalking and harassment	19%	73%	7%	1%
When to use Stalking Specific Power	16%	55%	28%	1%
When a reported case is high risk	46%	49%	5%	1%
How to identify patterns in stalking offending behaviours	32%	62%	5%	1%
Cyberstalking	16%	45%	35%	3%
Risks of cyberstalking	13%	56%	25%	3%
How stalking reports are managed by your force	24%	54%	16%	5%
When to refer a case to your supervisor	48%	49%	2%	1%

Table 1: Levels of confidence

When asked if they found it difficult to identify patterns in stalking behaviour, 94 percent of officers either disagreed or strongly disagreed, again indicating confidence in this area. However, when asked the same question in relation to cyberstalking, 72 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed — with a 22 percent point drop. The disparity in officers' confidence when dealing with physical stalking and cyberstalking is problematic, particularly given the reported surge in cyberstalking involving social media, messaging apps and emails, during the lockdown pandemic, which is when this research was conducted.

Policing cyberstalking

Questions related to cyberstalking were also asked because of anecdotal reports that perpetrators had turned to online tactics involving social media, messaging apps and emails, to harass and stalk their victims during the Covid-19 lockdown, with victims reporting that they felt failed by the police (Grierson, 2020). All interview participants but one agreed that they witnessed an increase in cyberstalking over the last few years, but this increase was more intensified during the pandemic lockdown.

The themes that emerged from the interviews were a 'significant increase' in stalking, the 'significant increase in revenge porn' and the use of 'spyware/CCTV access'. All 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 COVID-19 pandemic specifically, saying:

> *"Furlough gave people a 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 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]

These findings are aligned with the Susie Lamplugh Trust's (2021: 1–17) research on stalking victims' experiences during Covid-19, reporting a rise in both online and offline stalking behaviours. They found that the intensity and frequency of perpetrators' obsessive and fixated behaviours were linked to the impact of lockdown restrictions, highlighting new and increased risks for victims of stalking (2021: 1–17).

The reasons provided for this perceived increase by stakeholders was the impact that mental health and substance abuse has had upon stalking behaviours:

"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 and 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]

It is well documented that the pandemic has had detrimental consequences on people's mental health and its effects might have intensified the already damaging effects of stalking on victims further still. Some victims reported the pandemic had intensified the distress caused by stalking, as people being locked at home had more time to think about what was happening to them. Others felt that their home was not a safe place (with their devices such as Amazon's Alexa or even their video-doorbell being hacked) but could not go anywhere where they could feel safe (Trust, 2021: 12).

"One caller to the National Stalking Helpline described feeling like a 'sitting duck' in the current circumstances. Stalking is a crime of psychological terror that impacts on all aspects of a victim's life, often in ways that are long-lasting and irreparable. During the immensely difficult circumstances that many are experiencing amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, it is essential that victims of stalking are not forgotten and that essential services continue to support them." (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2020).

Officers also identified the ease of cyberstalking as a *modus operandi*:

"Let's face it. It's so much easier to cyberstalk someone than really [physically] 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]

The single officer who did not view there being a change highlighted that, if stalkers are truly obsessed with someone, a lockdown will not serve as an inhibitor to their behaviours:

"If someone is that obsessed with someone and fixated on them [to the extent] 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]

New methods identified by stakeholders included stalkers sending gifts, accessing CCTV and video-doorbells, using smart technology devices (such as Alexa) and creating fake social media accounts to befriend and spy on 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-intimate partners, but also by strangers obtaining personal content, such as photos from social media, and selling them on popular platforms including 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 [on OnlyFans] selling her images." [Stakeholder ID:1]

It was noted in the stakeholder interviews that this has been a difficulty for effective policing, as the lack of knowledge around cyberstalking has meant that defining if a crime had been committed was not clear to officers, as the behaviours do not fit the existing classifications of a traditional stalking *modus operandi*. This observation was, in part, supported by the surveys with police officers, who registered a notably lower level of confidence in their understanding and identification of cyberstalking than they did other more traditional forms of stalking. Traditionally, police have been early adopters of new concepts of technologies (Europol, 2021). For example, the British police have been at the forefront of combating online child exploitation and abuse, using sophisticated undercover strategies, computerised databases, and DNA records of child abuse images (Martellozzo, 2010: 104–125; Quayle et al., 2018: 223–238; Smith, 2014). However, it appears that there is still a long way to go before online stalking is tackled with the same intensity.

Officers also expressed a concern regarding the increased severity of risk that cyberstalking poses, as well as the role of social media apps in the proliferation of stalking behaviours:

"The one that scares me the most is the stranger element. When, for example, the victim certainly hasn't got any genuine idea who this person is contacting them … I think, social media is to blame for quite a lot." [Officer ID:2]

And:

"On Snapchat you can message someone and then the message kind of disappears … Snapchat has been problematic and over the last couple of years [and] I have noticed the increase of revenge porn, especially in domestics." [Officer ID:5]

Victims' lack of confidence

Despite their confidence in being able to recognise stalking behaviours, some officers admitted feeling ill-equipped when it comes to policing online stalking, due to its complexity and the need for specialised training.

"The cyber element is always changing. You've got watching and spying on the person. You've got monitoring the victim using internet email or any other electronic communication. But there's probably some behaviours that I missed because I don't know, I don't know the world of stalking." [Officer ID:8]

As well as;

"It's changing and it's becoming more sophisticated and we, the police are always, three or four steps behind because we always have to play catch up and we're never in front of it." [Officer ID:7]

Given that a large proportion of stalking takes place online, a deficit in police confidence when dealing with cyberstalking may explain the lack of trust that victims report as a barrier in their reporting to police. The Suzie Lamplugh Trust found that many victims, who did not report, felt they would not be taken seriously, listened to or believed, with others indicating that police had previously been unhelpful (Trust, 2021: 8). Of the victims who did report stalking to the police, only 20% found their experience satisfactory for reasons such as the police's (perceived) inability to understand the nature of stalking or, even worse, to recognise stalking as an offence at all. They also felt this inability to recognise and deal with stalking effectively was related to inadequate police training (Ibid. 2021: 9).

This latter issue was recognised by the officers in this study, who acknowledged the changing nature of stalking and the role of social media in the facilitation and proliferation of stalking, and fake profiles as being the greatest cyberstalking risks to victims.

Further observations on the changing nature of stalking included:

"Digitally-enabled behaviour … [is] up from 80 to 85 percent. But to go to not having talked to a single person this year who hasn't reported some kind of digital behaviour is … quite unusual." [Stakeholder ID:1]

And:

"None of this [the rising rate of cyberstalking] is because that, you know, there's any correlation between their IQ or their internet, you know. [That] they are technological now is because they invest so much time in researching how to do this stuff. There is, it's widely available the technology, there are YouTube videos about how to do this." [Stakeholder ID:2]

Because of these changes, there may be scope for further developing officers' knowledge and understanding on cyberstalking, to better account for digitally facilitated conduct. This idea was put forward by the officers, who openly expressed a desire for more up to date training particularly on stalking, so they are capable to give more effective advice to victims and ask more probing questions to both victims and offenders.

The identification of cyberstalking as a key emerging mode of stalking is indeed of great importance, particularly when the lower levels of confidence expressed by officers dealing with digital offending is considered.

Discussion

This research has reinforced the notion that crimes committed online have created new challenges for the police, particularly if we reflect on the fact that a single offender is able to use technology to enter, from a distance, what is perceived to be the safest place for most people: the home. The Covid-19 lockdown measures initially may have appeared as an enhanced safety provision, with victims less physically accessible to their stalkers than before. In reality, this sense of safety was seemingly only an illusion, as some stalkers, helped by the use of technology, continued to control, humiliate and threat their targets, locked in one place, possibly even more than before the lockdown commenced (Bracewell et al., 2020: 1–7).

This research also shows that the new modes of online violence and victimisation do not fit the traditional definitions and some police tactics may simply not work online as they

would do offline. This creates obvious problems for the police, as they would not be able to recognise where the real threats are to the victims and, as a result, would not be able to respond effectively, making victims feel even more invisible, disillusioned and defeated. In their recent book, Bartelett et al (2020) argue that treating online threats differently from threats issued via other methods (or not following them up at all), "assumes that threats delivered online are less likely to culminate in action" (2020: 301). The officers that participated in this study recognised that stalkers do not need to be physically close to their victims to inflict harm and fear and that underestimating the seriousness of online behaviours can have severe consequences on community safety. However, it emerged that there is a notable sense of professional uncertainty around online stalking, and how to deal with the problem effectively. This uncertainty is unquestionably not related to the lack of officers' motivation, but to the absence of a stalking tool that effectively addresses cyberstalking, accompanied by effective multiagency training that would assist officers to understand the nature of the issue and to respond to it effectively.

The question of whether additional training would improve officers' response to cyberstalking is a matter of contention, with a traditional deficit in research on police training resulting in the evidence-based links between training and efficacy in law enforcement is not as strong as it could be. Increasingly, though, a consensus is developing that suggests that there is a clear correlation between police training and positive procedural justice outcomes. In research conducted into training in the Chicago Police Department, Wood et al. concluded that "training changes actual police behaviour in desired ways while officers are in the field" (2020: 2020). While research like that conducted by Owens et al. (2018: 41–87) and Antrobus et al. (2019: 29–53) saw a degree of success in improving on-the-job behaviour in police officers, the lasting impact of this training remains a matter of debate, with the impact of said training "decay[ing] over time" (Antrobus et al., 2019: 29). However, that the impact of training decays over time should not be seen as a barrier to training in general, but rather a call for ongoing, regular multiagency professional development designed to ensure that the positive impacts of police training are able to be maintained as much as possible. Finally, this research reinforces Bracewell et al.'s (2020: 7) proposition suggesting that the unique risks for stalking victims in the online context require a bespoke response, which currently does not exist. Therefore, policymakers, police leadership and relevant stakeholder agencies should work

closely together to explore both challenges and opportunities of existing and emerging technologies (Europol, 2021).

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