

Solutions for dealing with stalking and harassment

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Abstract

The current practice of dealing with cases of stalking and harassment fails both victims and (potential) offenders, as was also confirmed by a recent investigation of 111 cases in the United Kingdom. This article outlines solutions, consisting of the establishment of new, specialized national organizations to deal exclusively with such cases and encouraging as well as enabling victims – particularly of sadistic stalking, which seeks to isolate the victims – to assist each other via local self-support groups. The new national organizations should also provide support to (potential) offenders. The article is written from a victim perspective in a relatively easily accessible style.

Keywords: stalking, harassment, policing, self-help, pooling of expertise

1. Introduction

The current practice of dealing with cases of stalking and harassment is failing both victims and perpetrators, while the past practices contains important lessons that continue to be ignored. The recent cases of Shana Grice, Bijan Ebrahimi and Molly McLaren in the U.K. and of Lauren McCluskey in the U.S. are unfortunate illustrations of why the current practice of dealing with serious stalking and harassment behaviors is inadequate and why random police officers should stop having to play a role in mental health assessments. These four individuals were all murdered by their stalkers/harassers.

Each of these victims had contacted the police. Shana Grice was subsequently fined for having wasted police time (see for example BBC News, 2017a), in spite of the fact that the man who ended up killing her previously been reported to the police by thirteen other victims (Roberts, 2017). In the case of Shana Grice, her stalker had indicated that something was wrong with him and that he might need “to be locked up or something” (Le Duc, 2017). The police victimized Bijan Ebrahimi in a gross case of discrimination (see for example BBC News, 2017b and Morris, 2017, 2018). In the case of Molly McLaren, a police officer may have unwittingly provoked the murder as well have missed the stalker’s announcement of that murder (see for example Harrison, 2018 and BBC News, 2018). In the case of Lauren McCluskey, the required IT expertise was not at hand. The availability of that expertise could have identified her stalker as the sender of various spoofed communications in time, which might have saved her life (Anderson, 2018). These four cases alone highlight the main causes of the problem. Random police officers lack the expertise needed to assess such cases, both in the area of mental health and of IT. There is also a lack of operational coordination.

Unfortunately, there have been many more cases. Alice Ruggles was killed by her ex-boyfriend days after she reported him to the police for stalking (Wilford, 2017) and Helen Pearson was stabbed in the face and neck after 125 reports of stalking she made to the police (Bulman, 2017a).

2. Status quo

When a stalking victim in the U.K. goes to the local police station, usually a version of the

following happens. The current practice in other countries is likely not very different. The officer at the desk will respond with what comes across as boredom and/or annoyance, certainly when compared against the eager response police officers give when someone claims to have a tip about ongoing money-laundering.

If the victim is persistent, a police officer may tell the victim to be prudent and to try and take a photo of the stalker. If the victim brings any evidence along, the police officer will take this at face value and assess it without any applicable knowledge. A print of an e-mail, whether genuine or faked, is likely to be accepted because it can be scanned. Any evidence that cannot be scanned into the computer is only likely to get lost (according to an officer on duty at Southampton's central police station; case number available upon motivated request). The police officer may also tell the victim to call the police if the victim is being attacked (also if the victim's phone has been hacked and the victim may not even be able to make such a call). He or she may also tell the victim frankly that investigating stalking takes up too many resources, particularly when digital technology is involved, but that honesty is still much better than offering the victim false reassurances or giving her the impression that the officer in question is dismissing the victim's report.

The police officer may also advise the victim to go to the police station where the first report was filed, if an earlier report was filed, stating that it is not possible for police officers at the present station to access that information on the computer system. If the victim, who may have to wait a long time to be able to scrape the travel sum together, finally makes it to the police station in the other town, the officer at that desk may refer the victim back to the police station in the town where the victim just came from.

What can also happen is that a police officer at a main police station advises a stalking victim to do her or his own investigating if the identity of the stalker is not known. If the victim follows up on this, however, it may then prompt officers at another, smaller station in the same town to inquire as to what the victim is doing as those officers appear to have no knowledge of the communications between victim and officers at the desk of the main police station. In fact, even at the same station as where the advice is given, other police officers at the same desk may be completely unaware of that advice and of the request to report back to police, causing them to ask the victim why she keeps handing in her reports. This lack of coordination or access to their own files was also a problem in for example the cases of Shana Grice and possibly also in the case of Katrina Makunova.

Doing one's own investigating can pose risks to the victim as 1) the stalker or someone in the stalker's environment may respond with anger and 2) the stalker or someone in the stalker's environment may report the victim for criminal harassment and may leave the victim with a criminal record. The victim is unlikely to be aware of the details of the applicable legislation that do allow a victim to carry out such activities (at least in England and Wales). A duty solicitor may well choose to disregard the applicable details of the law that allow the victim to engage in a behavior for the sake of stopping or detecting crime (at least in England and Wales) for the sake of his or her time management.

In the interactions between victims and police officers, police officers may come across as considering themselves experts in the areas of IT, mental health and stalking techniques as well as stalkers' motives. In reality, however, most police officers have no more knowledge of these areas than a typical industrious takeaway owner without website or the average homeless drug addict.

Police officers, for example, tend to assume that stalkers always contact their victims under their own names. In reality, some stalkers may even sometimes deliberately hand police officers proof of

their activities, safe in the knowledge that the police officers will not recognize it as such. In the U.K., particularly the work of Sheridan and coworkers (e.g., Boon and Sheridan, 2001) should be well known among police officers, yet does not appear to be at all.

In the U.K., a possible reason for much of the present problem may be a relatively recent update in legislation, which on the one hand was a positive development, but on the other hand results in police officers now often being confronted with many reports of “he said she said” interactions that may not pose a threat to anyone and even getting snowed under by them. Police officers often have to follow up on these simpler complaints because these cases tend to offer a relatively high degree of clarity. Alleged victim and alleged perpetrator are clear, names and addresses often known, so in practice, police officers will often have no choice but to assume that the reported stalking and/or harassment is a legitimate complaint and travel to the alleged offender’s address to deliver a written warning (called a Police Information Notice or PIN in the U.K), without having to do any investigation or verification.

I can set up an e-mail account under someone else’s name, send myself a horrible e-mail, print it, take it to a police station and it is likely to be accepted as evidence of someone else having sent me a horrible e-mail. Depending on the exact nature of the e-mail, an officer will then be dispatched to the home of someone else, who did not actually send that e-mail and who will not even get to see a copy of the email but will receive a PIN, in the U.K.

In some cases, police officers decide to target the victim after he or she contacted the police, perhaps because they are of the opinion that the victim’s age or physique makes it unlikely that he or she is being stalked and suspect that the opposite is the case and/or blindly accuse the victim of lying. This happened in, for example, the case of Shana Grice.

In summary, going to the police tends to victimize victims of serious cases of stalking further. Firstly, because the victims feel not heard and secondly, because when a stalker becomes aware of the fact that the victim has contacted the police, the stalker may become enraged as a result and subsequently feel empowered upon the discovery that the police is not responding to the victim’s complaints. In some cases, stalkers even have friends among police officers. Thus, victims of severe forms of stalking may struggle for years (sometimes only to be vilified by police officers when victims desperately try to make their lives work in spite of being stalked and, for example, make attempts to remedy the situation) or be murdered by their stalkers shortly after.

At the moment, the best advice to victims of stalking and harassment, in my opinion, is to refrain from contacting the police at all in any cases of stalking and harassment, but instead to relocate across a great distance immediately and start living under an assumed name. Unfortunately, none of us know how stalking begins if we have never been stalked before. It is neither logical nor feasible to expect everyone to be a possible stalker.

A “joint report by the Inspectorate of Constabulary and the CPS released in July 2018 looked at 112 cases of stalking in England and Wales and found that not one of them had been dealt with properly” (Ditum, 2018; HMIC, 2017).

3. Proposals for solutions

3.1. *New organizations to deal with stalking offenses*

Investigating stalking should not be a standard police matter at all. Instead, I argue for the establishment of independent national organizations, which have teams containing specialized IT

professionals, specialized psychologists and psychiatrists as well as experienced specialized investigators. Ideally, this would have the following advantages:

- Reported cases of stalking can be swiftly and accurately assessed for their risk levels (triage, for example, according to Sheridan's classification).
- Professional mediation can take place. Some police stations have posters on the wall about organizations who can mediate in cases in which people with certain learning disabilities engage in behaviors that pose no risk but are experienced as puzzling, worrisome or upsetting by others and reported as stalking.
- Individuals at risk of committing serious crimes are not ignored, as happened in the case of Shana Grice, but receive the assistance they need.
- It would take a big load off the police forces, as it would put a stop to the large effort currently taken up by "he said she said" reports, delivery of PINs and the resulting mental fatigue among police officers.
- It would result in a much more effective use of the funds that are currently associated with all reports of stalking and harassment.
- It could save lives, both of victims and of offenders.

3.2. *Taking brain scans in addition to DNA and fingerprints*

These teams might have to acquire the power to add various types of brain scans to the practice of taking DNA and fingerprints (already standard in England and Wales), as individuals who may be more likely to engage in serious stalking behaviors and be incapable of compliance, such as those with a narcissistic personality disorder or with antisocial personality disorder, have structural brain differences (see for example Schulze et al., 2013). Not only could this help in the assessment of the risk in individual cases, it could also stop potential offenders from becoming actual offenders, as it might enable them to receive timely specialized support. Health care for such brain-related conditions and other mental health conditions lags behind considerably on health care for physical conditions that have no consequences for behavior.

There are obvious ethical issues attached. However, while it may not be possible to support some offenders or potential offenders (perhaps notably those who have these structural brain difference without having experienced abuse), it may be possible to do something for those whose brains developed abnormally as a result of persistent severe early-childhood abuse. As it is already standard police practice in many jurisdictions to take DNA and fingerprints from possible offenders (including those who are innocent), the step to scans may not be as large as it may initially seem.

3.3. *Assistance for (potential) offenders*

Sheridan and her coworkers (e.g., Boon and Sheridan, 2001) examined a number of stalking cases, but mainly focused on the offenses as experienced by the victims. They came up with four broad categories of stalking, of which some characteristics can overlap. Part of their description of sadistic stalking is that these offenders seek out victims who at the beginning of the stalking are considered happy, "good", stable, and content and who appear "worthy of spoiling".

I argue that there may be cases in which this occurs because the offender is subconsciously looking for people who are capable of reparenting him or her and are least likely to reject the stalker. (To

themselves, these stalkers may justify their activities as aiming to “cure” or “heal” their target, who they may see as flawed individuals, for example, because they are kind.) I also argue that many of these offenders may have a severe narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), likely in combination with other pathological traits (co-morbidity). Individuals along this spectrum from mild NPD to severe NPD with “psychopathy” may not respond well or at all to punishment, but often respond well to what they consider rewards.

They may dole out punishments as part of the stalking and particularly individuals on the NPD end of the spectrum can respond badly to perceived slights. A perceived slight can be anything, just like a reward from the victim may only be perceived as such by the stalker. Narcissistic supply, for example, does not always exist in reality, by which I mean that it can be fully imagined on the side of a sadistic stalker, as with delusional fixation stalking. This may hold keys for how to manage them. The typical and understandable responses from victims – including contacting the police – may trigger the negative responses that then result in the victim's “destruction”.

All of this is also connected with another way in which police officers currently sometimes victimize victims of serious stalking even further. In a way, they hold victims responsible for not knowing how to deal with a stalker and for doing what he or she can in order to make his or her own life as livable as possible in the presence of stalking, which I’ve briefly mentioned before. This can include negotiating with a stalker, as this would be a normal behavior in normal circumstances, or attempting to find out who or what they are dealing with. Police officers sometimes even seem to blame victims for not having recognized that someone was a potential stalker, hence for not having relocated instantly upon having met the person in question, in spite of the fact that this person may have been a stranger who the victim may not even have had any dealings with in person. Finally, the immense stress stalking victims experience, particularly when they are not heard by police and perhaps in particular when the stalking occurs anonymously can cause victims to act out, potentially leading to further victimization by police. Here too, having specialized teams deal with all cases of stalking and harassment could make a major difference.

3.4. Support groups for victims

It might also be a good idea to start local groups for stalking victims, in which they can support each other and prevent the isolation as well as ameliorate feelings of vulnerability that are common among stalking victims. While it may in first instance sound regrettable to put some of the onus on victims, the potential benefits for them far outweigh the downsides. The powerlessness experienced by stalking victims could be greatly reduced this way and lead to actual empowerment, with women educating each other on best practices, for example for women who run their own businesses and therefore have to be active and visible online.

Apparently, 1 in 5 women in the U.K. will get stalked in her lifetime, and 1 in 10 men. Based on data from a Crime Survey for England and Wales in combination with data from a study by Sheridan and coworkers (Boon and Sheridan, 2001), I arrived at a number of up to roughly 45 women being subjected to sadistic stalking in a town like Portsmouth (Hampshire, England), which has a little over 200,000 inhabitants. In reality, some types of stalking will be more prevalent in areas in which that type of stalking is easier.

According to National Stalking Advocacy Service Paladin, “data from the Crime Survey of England and Wales shows up to 700,000 women are stalked each year (2009-12)”. If 12.9% of those cases concern sadistic stalking, as in Sheridan’s study, that could include 90,300 victims of sadistic stalking, then. The size of the combined populations of England (53.01 million in 2011) and Wales (approximately 3,063,456 in 2011) was 56,063,456. 700,000 stalked women represent a little over

1% of that total population, but that population also contains minors and men. So let's say that about 0.5% of women are stalked. (This excludes stalking that is 100% cyberstalking.) For this calculation, I assumed that stalking is distributed evenly across the geography, which it won't be.

Portsmouth's population in 2010 was 207,100; its working-age population was 145,000. If I take 50% of that as the number of women, I end up with up to about 360 stalked women in Portsmouth alone. If 12.9% of those cases concern sadistic stalking, as in Sheridan's study, then about 45 women in Portsmouth were targeted by sadistic stalkers in 2010/2011.

What this means in practice, is that the numbers of local victims appear to be sufficiently high for local victims' self-support groups to have the potential to make a real difference. For starters, it could help victims break out of the isolation they are often backed into.

4. Cost aspects

Clearly, establishing a new agency that deals exclusively with cases of stalking and harassment would require funds. However, this could likely be simply a matter of reallocating funds that are currently spent by police forces on such cases. The 2017 report (HMIC, 2017) did not include budget data and I received no response to an e-mail inquiry. (I did not follow this up with a Freedom of Information request.) As the police forces would be able to function much more efficiently from that point on, working on other types of crimes, and the new agency would undoubtedly be much more effective, the establishment of such an agency also makes sense from a budget perspective.

5. Conclusions

Victims of serious stalking and harassment are currently often left in the cold, along with (potential) offenders who require support. Investigations of stalking and harassment should not be a standard police matter, but should become the task of specialized national organizations with teams of specialists in IT, psychology, psychiatry and investigative techniques. This would unburden police forces, should stop some (potential) offenders from becoming offenders or from committing even more serious crimes and prevent that some victims are either murdered or have their lives ripped to shreds. Local support groups in which victims join hands might go a long way toward undoing or preventing some of the damage stalking can do to victims' lives. Professional support and mediation instead of criminalization of should be offered to offenders and potential offenders. Brain scans should become standard in medical checkups as well as in stalking and harassment risk assessments to detect brain-based conditions over which the affected individuals have little control but that can affect behavior, including compliance with laws.

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