Teen Stalking Victims: Analysis of Consequences Reveals Disturbing Trends

14% of teenage girls and 13% of boys report being a victim of stalking, and these teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, according to a new study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

Ann Arbor, MI, November 16, 2016 – 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.

### NOT FOR EDITORS

“Behavioral and Mental Health Correlates of Youth Stalking Victimization: A Latent Class Approach,” by Dennis E. Reidy, PhD, Joanne P. Smith-Darden, PhD, Poco D. Kernsmith, PhD, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2016.08.035 published online in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, in advance of Volume 51, Issue 6 (December 2016), by Elsevier.

Full text of this article is available to credentialed journalists upon request; contact Jillian B. Morgan at +1 734-936-1590 or ajpmmedia@elsevier.com. Journalists wishing to interview the authors should contact CDC Media Relations, at +1 404-639-3286 or media@cdc.gov.

ABOUT THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

The American Journal of Preventive Medicine (www.ajpmonline.org) is the official journal of The American College of Preventive Medicine (www.acpm.org) and the Association for Prevention Teaching and Research (http://www.aptrweb.org/). It publishes articles in the areas of prevention research, teaching, practice and policy. Original research is published on interventions aimed at the prevention of chronic and acute disease and the promotion of individual and community health. The journal features papers that address the primary and secondary prevention of important clinical, behavioral and public health issues such as injury and violence, infectious disease, women's health, smoking, sedentary behaviors and physical activity, nutrition, diabetes, obesity, and alcohol and drug abuse. Papers also address educational initiatives aimed at improving the ability of health professionals to provide effective clinical prevention and public health services. The journal also publishes official policy statements from the two co-sponsoring organizations, health services research pertinent to prevention and public health, review articles, media reviews, and editorials.

The American Journal of Preventive Medicine, with an Impact Factor of 4.465, is ranked 14th in Public, Environmental, and Occupational Health titles and 16th in General & Internal Medicine titles for total number of citations according to the 2015 Journal Citation Reports® published by Thomson Reuters, 2016.

ABOUT ELSEVIER

Elsevier (www.elsevier.com) is a world-leading provider of information solutions that enhance the performance of science, health, and technology professionals, empowering them to make better
decisions, deliver better care, and sometimes make groundbreaking discoveries that advance the boundaries of knowledge and human progress. Elsevier provides web-based, digital solutions – among them ScienceDirect (www.sciencedirect.com), Scopus (www.scopus.com), Elsevier Research Intelligence (www.elsevier.com/research-intelligence), and ClinicalKey (www.clinicalkey.com) – and publishes over 2,500 journals, including The Lancet (www.thelancet.com) and Cell (www.cell.com), and more than 35,000 book titles, including a number of iconic reference works. Elsevier is part of RELX Group (www.relx.com), a world-leading provider of information and analytics for professional and business customers across industries. www.elsevier.com