

# Characteristics and Dynamics of Cyberstalking Victimization Among Juveniles and Young Adults

Violence Against Women  
1–22

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## Abstract

Using the nationally representative Ipsos online KnowledgePanel, the sample included three hundred thirty-six 18- to 28-year-olds who retrospectively reported first cyberstalking incidents as juveniles (9- to 17-year-olds) or adults. Half of the sample first experienced cyberstalking as juveniles and half first experienced it as adults. Juveniles were more likely to have more than two perpetrators in the same episode, to experience more violent threats, and to avoid people because of what happened. Few reported the incident to the police, with juveniles less likely to report it to the police. Cyberstalking of juveniles appears just as or more serious than cyberstalking of adults.

## Keywords

juvenile victimization, cyberstalking, technology-facilitated abuse

Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA), which includes non-consensual sexting, sextortion, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking, is a growing adjunct to interpersonal crime and victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2023). It has been found to exacerbate the consequences of intimate partner victimization (Afrouz, 2023). Some topics in the TFA literature have received more attention than others. Cyberbullying targeting children has received intensive coverage as have non-consensual sexting and online grooming (Finkelhor et al., 2021). Also, more attention has been paid to TFA targeting children than adults, despite research suggesting that a substantial

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portion of TFA victims, such as those experiencing cyberstalking and sextortion, are young adults (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Few studies have compared cyberstalking targeting juveniles compared to young adults.

This focus on children likely stems in part from concerns about children's differential vulnerability (Nightingale & Fischhoff, 2002). Youth are just starting to explore intimate and romantic relationships and have less experience with the norms and standards guiding those relationships (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Youth also are more dependent on others for help and protection and have less control over whom they associate with (Finkelhor, 2008). This may put them at greater risk of exploitation, make fear and other reactions more acute, and limit the actual assistance they get (Finkelhor & Kendall-Tackett, 1997). Concern about their vulnerability is reflected in the existence of specific criminal statutes that differentially address children's victimization (Guggenheim et al., 2015). We also know child sexual abuse survivors are at greater risk for sexual revictimization (Pittenger et al., 2018).

In this article, we focus on cyberstalking, which refers to unwanted contact between people via technology that directly or indirectly communicates a threat or creates fear in the victim (Davidson et al., 2019). There is a considerable literature on stalking, and some specifically on cyberstalking. A review of 49 studies (Kaur et al., 2021) found similarities between cyberstalking and in-person stalking, such as evoking fear of being victimized and psychological distress (Short et al., 2015), but also found cyberstalking victims feel technical privacy invasions and may not know the identity of the cyberstalker (Short et al., 2014). Little is known about whether the characteristics and dynamics of cyberstalking differ when committed against minors compared to young adults (Kaur et al., 2021). Differences in, for example, how long incidents last or how many other people are involved, could help inform prevention and intervention efforts.

Cyberstalking overlaps considerably with cyberbullying. Both involve unwanted, often aggressive contact via technology. Cyberbullying is often defined as aggression that is intentionally and repeatedly carried out via technology against someone who cannot easily defend themselves (Davidson et al., 2019). The perpetrators can include online strangers, but larger proportions tend to be acquaintances and former intimate partners (Smith et al., 2022). Cyberbullying is generally toward someone who is weaker or who has less power and could include making fun of someone. Whereas cyberstalking, like in-person stalking, specifically involves making the person feel very afraid, anxious, angry, or fearful (Kaur et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2022). The fear can be created by the perpetrator's apparent intent to pursue or extend an unwanted romantic or sexual relationship, by expressions of hate around race, ethnicity, homophobia or political beliefs, or other sources of conflict or grievance (Berry & Bainbridge, 2017).

### *Prevalence of Cyberstalking*

The absence of a widely accepted definition of cyberstalking has resulted in studies operationalizing it in various ways, reducing the comparability of prevalence rates and generalizability of findings (Nobles et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2022). For example, a

review of 33 studies found that the number and description of behaviors varied widely, with 70% of studies not including specific timeframe requirements in which the behaviors needed to occur (Wilson et al., 2022). Studies using a lifetime rate generally find between 35% and 46% of participants have experienced cyberstalking (35%; DeKeseredy et al., 2019; 41%; Reyns et al., 2012; 46%; Maran & Begotti, 2019).

One of the most comprehensive studies on stalking, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey's (NIPSV) report on stalking (2022), found that one in three women (31%) and one in six men (16%) experienced stalking at some point in their lives (Smith et al., 2022). Of those who had experienced stalking, most (56% of female victims and 61% of male victims) had experienced stalking via social media, such as by unwanted texts, photos, and emails (Smith et al., 2022). This study found that most victims were 25 years or older when they first experienced stalking (41% of female victims and 50% of male victims) and 34% of female victims and 30% of male victims were between the ages of 18 and 24 (Smith et al., 2022). However, one in four (24%) females and one in five (19%) males first experienced stalking when they were 17 or younger.

Other studies find the prevalence of cyberstalking among juveniles between 5% (Marcum et al., 2014) and 11% (Jones et al., 2013) for 10- to 17-year-olds. A study in Portugal found 61.9% of adolescents aged 12–16 reported having been repeated victims of cyberstalking, that is, they were victims of a single cyberstalking behavior more than once or they were victims of two or more different behaviors at least once (Pereira & Matos, 2016). The threatening behavior of cyberstalking overlaps considerably with cyberbullying, which also involves the use of technology to threaten or create fear. Reviews have found a wide range in the prevalence of cyberbullying depending on the study. A meta-analysis of 72 studies found 15% of youth reported cyberbullying victimization (Modecki et al., 2014). Another systematic review of 63 studies on cyberbullying among children and adolescents found between 14% and 58% had been victims of cyberbullying (Zhu et al., 2021). A scoping review of 36 studies of 12- to 18-year-olds found a median of 23% had experienced cyberbullying (Hamm et al., 2015). Several studies show that cyberbullying is not as frequent as face-to-face bullying, less than half the rate (15% vs. 36%) in one large meta-analysis of 80 studies (Modecki et al., 2014). In sum, the term cyberbullying is more often used in studies focusing on children and adolescents versus adults (Pereira & Matos, 2016), and few studies have used the same definition to compare the prevalence of cyberstalking among juveniles to that of young adults (Wilson et al., 2022, 2023).

### *Characteristics and Consequences of Cyberstalking*

As Davidson and colleagues (2019) note, there is inadequate research exploring the nature of cyberstalking victimization and the extent to which any specific groups appear to be at greater risk. The most common perpetrators for both male and female victims of stalking are acquaintances or current/former intimate partners (Smith et al., 2022).

Several emotional and physical symptoms have been reported by victims of cyberstalking. A systematic review of 43 studies of adult victims found the impact of cyberstalking ranged from distress, shame, and panic to anxiety, to self-harm and attempted suicide (Stevens et al., 2021). Consequences can include feeling anger (40%), irritation (34%), confusion (30%), sadness (20%), aggression (15%), and a lack of confidence in others (15%; Maran & Begotti, 2019). Other research indicates that because of the persistence of cyberstalking perpetrators, victims often report feeling powerless and socially isolated (Blaauw et al., 2002). Some victims of cyberstalking change their lifestyle as a response to being victimized and some will change their address, phone number, and/or email address (Nobles et al., 2014).

Like other types of victimization, most stalking and cyberstalking victims do not report their experiences to law enforcement and less than one-third engage in help-seeking behaviors (Fisher et al., 2016; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014). A recent national study found across 11 different types of TFA, only 7.3% were reported to websites and 4.8% to law enforcement (authors). Reasons for not reporting included low intensity (55.7%), fear/embarrassment (35.4%), and didn't think it would help (29.6%). Studies indicate that more serious cyberstalking offenses are more likely to be reported to the police (Fissel, 2021; Reyns and Englebrecht, 2010).

Like adult victims of cyberstalking, research on youth victims of cyberbullying also finds significant emotional impacts. Two reviews exploring cyberbullying and youths' mental health found that depression and anxiety were the most experienced emotions by victims (Bottino et al., 2015; Kwan et al., 2020). Cyberbullying among youth occurs to both boys and girls to about equal degree (Sorrentino et al., 2019). Other research finds that cyberbullying peaks at ages 13–15, somewhat older than conventional bullying (Mitchell et al., 2016; Sorrentino et al., 2019).

Like adults, juveniles are not likely to report cyberbullying. Several studies describe juveniles' apprehension to reporting as feeling uncertain about, or fearful of, the consequences of reporting (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Burnham & Wright, 2012; Dennehy et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2015). Specifically, young people were concerned about parents' lack of experience with cyber issues (Burnham & Wright, 2012; Smith et al., 2008) and fearful that adult intervention would lead to an intensification of cyberbullying or an escalation to physical violence (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2015).

### *Current Study*

Few studies have explored characteristics and dynamics of cyberstalking committed against juveniles compared to adults. This information could help to tailor age-appropriate prevention and intervention efforts by better understanding the extent to which there are similarities and differences between juveniles and young adult victims. Other researchers have noted that more research is needed on victim diversity, such as sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and whether certain groups are more likely to be victims of cyberstalking behavior (Davidson et al., 2019). Kaur and colleagues' (2021) systematic review of cyberstalking shows more research is needed on the

types of activities perpetrators engage in on social media, as well as on victims' responses and the consequences of cyberstalking. There is also limited research dedicated to understanding the reporting and help-seeking behaviors of victims of cyberstalking (Fissel, 2021).

The goals of the current study were to compare juvenile and adult cyberstalking victims and the (1) context, such as demographics, the number of cyberstalking incidents, and whether those who first experience cyberstalking as juveniles experience higher rates as adults compared to those who first experienced it as adults; (2) characteristics of first-time incidents, such as the number of people involved, how long it lasted, and whether victims know the identity of the person; (3) actions perpetrators took on social media and the types of technology used; (4) victims' emotional reactions, as well as negative and positive consequences of cyberstalking; and (5) reporting behavior, whether it was helpful, and reasons they did not report the incident.

## **Methodology**

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted using the nationally representative Ipsos online KnowledgePanel (KP) in the United States. KP is a sample that Ipsos has recruited by Address Based Sampling, from mail addresses gleaned from national universal address databases. After the mail recruitment, participants agreed to participate in regular online surveys. Digital devices were provided to any recruited sample members who lacked devices to participate. The KP panelists who were 18- to 28-year-olds (13,884) were solicited for the current survey in 2021. This age range was selected to target those who had completed childhood in the recent Internet and social media era. In total, 2,639 panel members participated in the survey by the end of data collection, 20% of the solicited eligible respondents. Such response rates are not atypical of modern survey research, and the KP design has been shown to be on par with what more traditional survey methods can currently provide (Barlas & Thomas, 2021; MacInnis et al., 2018). The study was approved and overseen by the Human Subjects Review Board of the University of New Hampshire.

Of the 2,639 completed surveys, 1,215 endorsed one or more of the screening questions about possible technology-facilitated victimizations. For those with multiple victimizations, the survey gathered follow-up information on two. The questionnaire only had room for details on two victimizations, although more than that could be reported in the screening section. When there were more than two types of episodes indicated by the screening questions, some were given priority. From a pretest, we ascertained which types were less common and prioritized them for follow-up to maximize the number of lower-rate types of episodes. The selection prioritization was taken into account in the weighting to keep from biasing the results. The final sample was slightly older and more female compared to the U.S. population of 18- to 28-year-olds. Weights were developed for the sample that adjusts for non-response and the prioritization of lower base-rate incidents among those with multiple exposures.

## Measures

*Demographics.* Respondent demographics, including sex, race/ethnicity, education, and sexual orientation were available in KP panel data. Sex options included “Male, Female, Trans male, Trans female, Gender fluid/non-conforming, Don’t know, or Prefer not to answer.” Responses “Trans male,” “Trans female,” and “Gender fluid/non-conforming” were recoded into “Gender minority.” Race/ethnicity options included White, non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Other non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and two or more races. Education options included Some high school or less, High school graduate, Some college, Associate degree, Bachelor’s degree, Master’s degree, and Professional or Doctorate degree. Sexual orientation includes “Heterosexual” or “Sexual minority,” which included responses “Gay/Lesbian,” “Bisexual/Pansexual,” and “Not listed.”

*Definition of cyberstalking.* Respondents were asked, “Has someone ever repeatedly contacted you online, on the phone, or in person when you did not want it, in a way that made you very afraid, anxious, or angry?” Responses included “Yes” or “No.” If yes, a series of follow-up questions asked about the first time this happened and whether this person repeatedly contacted them through technology only, in-person only, both in-person and through technology, or don’t know. Because we were interested in cyberstalking, only those who answered they were contacted through technology both in-person and through technology and through technology were included in the sample.

*How often and age at first and last time.* Respondents were asked, “How old were you when (the first time) this happened?” Because we were interested in comparing juveniles versus adults, responses were grouped into two groups, “9- to 17-year-olds” and “18- to 28-year-olds.” Respondents were asked, “How many times did this happen to you in your whole life?” Responses ranged from 1 to 100, with most responses between 1 and 4 times, and were recoded into “1 time,” “2–4 times,” “5–9 times,” and “10 or more times.” Participants were asked, “How old were you the last time this happened?” Responses were recoded into “12- to 17-year-olds,” “18- to 19-year-olds,” “20- to 24-year-olds,” and “25- to 28-year-olds.”

*First-time incident characteristics.* Respondents were also asked to describe what happened in a few sentences. A series of follow-up questions asked about the first time this happened, including how many perpetrators were involved in the incident, how long it had been going on, whether they knew the person’s identity, and if so, what was the relationship, perpetrator gender and age (see Table 2).

*Actions perpetrators took on social media.* Respondents were asked to choose all of the actions this person did when this was happening. Actions endorsed by 5% or more of the sample are listed in Table 3. Respondents were asked what types of technology (such as apps, social media sites, and text messages) this person used when he/she made unwanted contact. Technology endorsed by 5% or more of the sample is listed in Table 3.

**Consequences.** Respondents were asked, “When this happened, how much did you feel the following?” Angry, afraid, sad, embarrassed, anxious or worried, flattered, like you couldn’t trust people, like you were alone, ashamed. Responses were: *not at all*, *somewhat*, *quite a bit*, and *extremely*. For the purpose of comparing those who had any of these emotional responses to those who did not, the responses: *somewhat*, *quite a bit*, and *extremely* were collapsed. Respondents were asked, “Because of what happened, did you lose friends; stay at home more often; avoid people at school, work, or anywhere else; skip school or classes; get worse grades or get behind at work; lose days at your job; have trouble concentrating at school or work; change your school or job; move to a different house/apartment; move to a new neighborhood, community, or town; see a doctor or counselor for mental health problems; begin to take or increase/change prescription medication for mental health problems; drink alcohol more often or in larger amounts; take recreational (non-prescription) drugs more often or in larger amounts.” Consequences endorsed by 5% or more of the sample are listed in Table 4.

Respondents were asked, “Did anything positive result from what happened?” and “What positive thing (s) resulted?” Responses were: “made money,” “became more popular,” “became more confident,” “learned to protect myself,” “felt more attractive or desirable,” and “made friends.”

**Reporting the incident.** Respondents were asked, “Did you or someone else make a report or complaint about what happened to any website or app?” “Did this (first) app or website do something helpful in response to your report (e.g., removing an image or suspending an account)?” and “Was this (first) app or website unhelpful in any way, for example, by refusing to help or ignoring the report?” Respondents who did not report to a website or app, were asked, “Do any of the following reasons describe why you did not report this situation to a website or app?” Responses were: “It didn’t occur to you,” “You felt it was not a big deal,” “You worried your report would not be anonymous,” “You couldn’t figure out how to make a report,” “You were afraid the person who threatened you would find out,” “You were embarrassed or ashamed or worried about being judged,” “You worried about being in trouble with your family,” “You did not think it would help,” “The situation stopped before it got to that point,” “There wasn’t anywhere to report it.”

Respondents were asked. “Did you or someone else report this situation to the police or did police find out some other way?” and “Did the police do something helpful in response to your report (e.g., removing an image or suspending an account)?” Respondents who reported the police were helpful were asked, “What was helpful?” Responses were the police “Were sympathetic,” “Conducted an investigation,” “Gave you resources,” and “Contacted the person responsible.” “Were the police unhelpful in any way, for example, by refusing to help or ignoring the report?” Respondents who reported the police were unhelpful were asked, “What was unhelpful?” Responses were “I felt blamed,” “I felt situation wasn’t taken seriously,” “Police did not understand,” and “Police said they could not do anything.”

## Sample

Approximately one-quarter (23.5%,  $N=765$ ) of all respondents answered yes to the question “Has someone ever repeatedly contacted you online, on the phone, or in person when you did not want it, in a way that made you very afraid, anxious, or angry?” Because we were interested in comparing minors to young adults, in this analysis we excluded respondents who did not answer the question asking the age at the first incident ( $n=18$ ) or who indicated they were extremely young at the time of the incident (aged 5 or younger,  $n=2$ ), as it likely represented a response error. In addition, we excluded one respondent who said they were older the first time and younger at the last incident. This resulted in a sample of 744 victims, with 56.3% of victims having their first experience as a juvenile and 43.7% of victims having their first experience as an adult.

Because the current study was part of a larger project on multiple forms of TFA, only some respondents were given follow-up questions about the cyberstalking incident. This was done to reduce the survey length and burden for respondents with multiple types of exposures. Given this skip pattern, approximately half (50.5%,  $N=376$ ) of the 744 respondents were asked the set of follow-up questions. One of the follow-up questions asked how they were contacted and only those who answered that they had been contacted either through technology only (cell phone, texts, online websites, or applications) or both in-person and through technology were included in the sample. Therefore, respondents who said they were contacted in-person only ( $n=22$ ), skipped that question ( $n=3$ ), or answered don't know ( $n=15$ ) were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the final sample for the current analysis was 336. Those who were not selected to answer follow-up questions were more likely to be female, 81% versus 56% of those who answered follow-up questions,  $F(1, 743)=16.97$ ,  $p<.0001$ . This is because more females experienced the other TFA victimization types and were asked to answer follow-up questions about other kinds of incidents.

Most (69.8%) juvenile victims were between the ages of 15 and 17 at the time of the episode, and 30.2% were between the ages of 9 and 14. Most (46.5%) adult victims were 18–19 years old, 38.8% were aged 20–24, and 14.6% were aged 25–28.

## Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata/SE Version 17.0 with survey weights applied. We conducted survey-adjusted cross-tabulations and chi-square tests to examine incidents occurring to juveniles, reported by respondents who described incidents that occurred when they were 17 or younger, compared with incidents occurring to young adults (aged 18–28).

## Results

### *Characteristics of Juvenile and Adult Victims*

Half of our analytic sample (50.9%) first experienced cyberstalking as juveniles and half (49.1%) first experienced it as adults. Although the majority (54.0%) of



cyberstalking victims were female, many were male (40.7%). Approximately one-third (38.3%) of those who described their first cyberstalking incident as juveniles (38.3%) were male and 43.3% of those who described their first cyberstalking incident as adults were male (Table 1). Approximately one-third of juvenile (34.4%) and adult (28.4%) victims were non-heterosexual. Juvenile victims were significantly more likely to be White, non-Hispanic compared to adult victims. Approximately one-third of both juvenile and adult victims were high school graduates, one-third had some college, and one-third had a bachelor's degree or higher. Respondents who were juveniles during their first cyberstalking incident were significantly more likely to be younger at their last incident compared to those who were adults during their first cyberstalking incident.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Sample (Weighted Percentages).

| Characteristic   | Total cyberstalking victims, %<br>(N = 336) | Juveniles, %<br>(n = 150) | Adults, %<br>(n = 186) | $\chi^2$ |
|--|---|---------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| Gender   |   |                           |                        | 0.52     |
| Male   | 40.7  | 38.3                      | 43.3                   |          |
| Female   | 54.0  | 57.9                      | 50.0                   |          |
| Gender minority  | 5.3   | 3.9                       | 6.8                    |          |
| Sexual orientation   |   |                           |                        | 0.48     |
| Heterosexual   | 68.6  | 65.7                      | 71.6                   |          |
| Sexual minority  | 31.4  | 34.3                      | 28.4                   |          |
| Race/Hispanic  |   |                           |                        | 4.39**   |
| White, non-Hispanic  | 55.1  | 67.3                      | 42.5                   |          |
| Black, non-Hispanic  | 10.7  | 3.2                       | 18.6                   |          |
| Hispanic   | 22.3  | 18.1                      | 26.7                   |          |
| Other/more than two races                                    | 11.8  | 11.4                      | 12.3                   |          |
| Education  |   |                           |                        | 0.80     |
| Less than high school  | 3.9   | 4.6                       | 3.2                    |          |
| High school graduate   | 35.0  | 37.8                      | 32.0                   |          |
| Some college   | 30.2  | 32.8                      | 27.6                   |          |
| Bachelor's degree or higher                                  | 30.9  | 24.8                      | 37.3                   |          |
| Age at last cyberstalking incident <sup>a</sup>              |   |                           |                        | 14.40*** |
| 12–17  | 20.4  | 35.5                      | n/a                    |          |
| 18–19  | 22.0  | 31.0                      | 9.9                    |          |
| 20–24  | 41.6  | 25.1                      | 63.7                   |          |
| 25–28  | 16.0  | 8.3                       | 26.4                   |          |
| How many times has cyberstalking happened in your whole life |   |                           |                        | 2.32     |
| 1  | 33.2  | 24.8                      | 41.9                   |          |
| 2–4  | 39.9  | 39.9                      | 39.8                   |          |
| 5–9  | 15.0  | 20.8                      | 8.9                    |          |
| 10 or more   | 12.0  | 14.5                      | 9.4                    |          |

Note. <sup>a</sup> Sample size for this is 115 for juveniles and 119 for adults.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Characteristics of First Cyberstalking Incident (Weighted Percentages).

| Characteristics                     | Total, %<br>(N = 336) | Juveniles, %<br>(n = 150) | Adults, %<br>(n = 186) | $\chi^2$ |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| How many people involved?           |                       |                           |                        | 4.58*    |
| 1                                   | 69.6                  | 68.4                      | 70.8                   |          |
| 2 or more                           | 13.3                  | 20.5                      | 5.7                    |          |
| Don't know/not sure                 | 17.2                  | 11.1                      | 23.6                   |          |
| How long has this been going on?    |                       |                           |                        | 1.51     |
| 1 week or less                      | 32.0                  | 30.6                      | 33.5                   |          |
| More than 1 week to 1 month         | 27.9                  | 34.3                      | 21.6                   |          |
| More than 1 month to 6 months       | 14.9                  | 15.3                      | 14.6                   |          |
| More than 6 months                  | 19.9                  | 13.1                      | 27.0                   |          |
| Don't know/not sure                 | 5.2                   | 6.9                       | 3.6                    |          |
| Do you know the identity of person? |                       |                           |                        | 1.83     |
| Yes                                 | 66.4                  | 72.4                      | 60.1                   |          |
| No/not sure                         | 33.6                  | 27.6                      | 39.9                   |          |
| (If yes) What is relation?          | N = 243               | N = 106                   | N = 137                | 0.23     |
| Other acquaintance                  | 46.3                  | 50.0                      | 41.8                   |          |
| Intimate partner or ex              | 23.3                  | 21.6                      | 24.9                   |          |
| Friend/relative                     | 14.3                  | 14.9                      | 13.6                   |          |
| Online relationship                 | 15.1                  | 13.5                      | 17.2                   |          |
| (If yes) Perpetrator gender         |                       |                           |                        | 0.005    |
| Male                                | 70.4                  | 70.7                      | 69.9                   |          |
| Female                              | 29.6                  | 29.3                      | 30.1                   |          |
| (If yes) Perpetrator age            |                       |                           |                        | 13.21*** |
| 17 or younger                       | 33.3                  | 58.9                      | 2.7                    |          |
| 18–21                               | 23.3                  | 14.5                      | 33.9                   |          |
| 22–25                               | 21.3                  | 12.4                      | 31.9                   |          |
| 26 or older                         | 22.2                  | 14.4                      | 31.5                   |          |

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Characteristics of First-Time Incidents

Juvenile victims were significantly more likely to have two or more people involved in the incident compared to adult victims (20.5% compared to 5.7%, Table 2). One-third of both juvenile and adult victims described incidents as lasting 1 week or less. By contrast, 13% of juvenile victims and 27% of adult victims described incidents lasting more than 6 months. A substantial proportion of both juvenile (27.6%) and adult (39.9%) victims did not know the identity of the person engaging in cyberstalking. Both juvenile and adult victims often described the person engaging in cyberstalking as an acquaintance or current or former intimate partner and male. Examples of acquaintances included, "A person at work repeatedly attempts to reach me by social media despite the fact that I have made it clear that I am not interested in him ... I was anxious he would out me as I am gay and have not told my family yet and angry that he would not take no as an answer" (age 18, #41) and "Someone at

school was trying to get me to meet up with them and perform sexual activities” (age 12, #2349).

Examples of intimate partners included, “A former boyfriend sent angry sexually explicit texts that were very threatening” (age 19, #19); “Boyfriend started pressuring for more texts and photos” (age 17, #1446); and “(He was) pressuring me to go back into a sexual relationship with him” (age 19, #2637). Respondents who described their first incident as a juvenile were significantly more likely to have perpetrators who were 17 or younger compared to respondents whose first incidence was as an adult.

### Perpetrator Actions

The most common actions taken by perpetrators were generally similar for juvenile and adult victims. These included repeated contact online after asking the person to stop (51.6%), sending “needy” or demanding messages (49.0%), sending exaggerated messages of affection (39.2%), and sending repeated and unwanted sexual messages (33.6%; see Table 3). Adult victims were more likely to have perpetrators pretend to

**Table 3.** Specific Actions Perpetrator Took (Weighted Percentages).

| What the perpetrator did                                  | Total, % (N = 336) |
|---|--------------------|
| Repeated contact online after asking him/her to stop      | 51.6               |
| Sent “needy” or demanding/controlling messages            | 49.0               |
| Sent exaggerated messages of affection                    | 39.2               |
| Sent repeated and unwanted sexual messages                | 33.6               |
| Sent repeated threatening messages                        | 18.4               |
| Pretended to be someone they were not                     | 16.7 <sup>a</sup>  |
| Spread rumors about you to damage your reputation         | 16.2               |
| Observed you in public                                    | 11.8               |
| Exposed private information about you to others           | 9.4                |
| Physically threatened you                                 | 9.1 <sup>b</sup>   |
| Obtained private information about you without permission | 8.0                |
| Followed you around in public                             | 7.8                |
| Directing others to interact with you in threatening ways | 6.7                |
| Sent gifts or tokens of affection                         | 5.1                |
| Types of technology used to make unwanted contact         |                    |
| Text messages   | 50.7               |
| Social networking websites or apps                        | 45.9               |
| Messaging or photo messaging apps                         | 31.3 <sup>c</sup>  |
| Email   | 7.5                |
| Dating site   | 7.4                |
| Video voice call programs                                 | 6.8                |
| Anonymous online chat websites or apps                    | 5.2                |

Note. <sup>a</sup> Adults were more likely to have perpetrators who pretended to be someone they were not compared to juveniles (23.5% vs. 10.5%),  $X^2(1, 335) = 3.61, p < .10$ . <sup>b</sup> Juveniles were more likely to have perpetrators who physically threatened them (13.5% vs. 4.5%),  $X^2(1, 335) = 3.96, p < .05$ . <sup>c</sup> Juveniles were more likely to have perpetrators use messaging apps compared to adults (45.5% vs. 16.6%),  $X^2(1, 335) = 15.80, p < .001$ .

be someone they were not compared to juvenile victims, 23.1% versus 10.5%,  $X^2(1, 335) = 3.61, p = .05$ . Juvenile victims were significantly more likely to have perpetrators physically threaten them compared to adult victims, 13.5% versus 4.5%,  $X^2(1, 335) = 3.96, p < .05$ . About 1 in 10 victims reported that perpetrators exposed private information about them to others (9.4%) and obtained private information about them without their permission (8.0%).

The types of technology used to make unwanted contact were generally similar for juvenile and adult victims. The two most common types of technology were using text messages (50.7%) and social networking sites (45.9%; see Table 3). Juvenile victims were significantly more likely to have perpetrators use messaging apps compared to adult victims, 45.5% versus 16.6%,  $X^2(1, 335) = 15.80, p < .001$ . Only 7% of respondents said perpetrators used dating sites for unwanted contact.

### *Consequences of Cyberstalking*

Juveniles and adults described many similar feelings and consequences of cyberstalking, over three-quarters of victims felt anxious or worried (86.8%), afraid (77.8%), or felt like they couldn't trust people (74.0%; see Table 4) at the time of the incident. About half of cyberstalking victims felt ashamed (54.5%), felt like they were alone (49.0%), or felt sad (48.7%). About one-quarter of respondents (24.5%) felt flattered. Other consequences included having trouble concentrating at school or work (23.1%), losing friends (12.9%), staying home more often (12.3%), and seeing a doctor or counselor (6.4%).

Juveniles were significantly more likely to report feeling embarrassed because of the incident, 72.6% compared to 56.2% of adults,  $X^2(1, 332) = 3.97, p < .05$ . Juveniles were also significantly more likely to report avoiding people at school, work, or anywhere else, 33.8% compared to 15.9% of adults,  $X^2(1, 333) = 5.89, p < .05$ . Adults, on the other hand, were significantly more likely to report being angry as a result of the incident, 90.5% compared to 75.6% of juveniles,  $X^2(1, 335) = 4.78, p < .05$ , and to report drinking alcohol more often, 8.9% compared to 2.6% of juveniles,  $X^2(1, 333) = 5.37, p < .05$ .

Nearly one in five (18.4%,  $n = 60$ ) cyberstalking victims reported something positive as a result of what happened (13.0% of juveniles and 24.1% of adults). Juveniles were significantly more likely to report that they learned how to protect themselves (96.3%) compared to adults, 65.3%,  $X^2(1, 59) = 5.37, p < .05$ . Juveniles and adults both reported other positive consequences, including becoming more confident (37.6%), making friends (18.7%), feeling more attractive or desirable (7.8%), and becoming more popular (4.3%)

### *Reporting the Incident*

About 1 in 10 cyberstalking victims (10.1%,  $n = 34$ ) made a report or complaint about what happened to the website or app (11.9% of juveniles and 8.3% of adults). Only one-third of cyberstalking victims (32.2%) thought the app or website did something

**Table 4.** Consequences of Cyberstalking (Weighted Percentages).

| Consequences                                     | Total, %<br>(N = 336) | Juveniles, %<br>(n = 150) | Adults, %<br>(n = 186) | $\chi^2$ |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| Did you feel...                                  |                       |                           |                        |          |
| Anxious or worried                               | 86.8                  | 88.0                      | 85.4                   | 0.21     |
| Angry  | 82.9                  | 75.6                      | 90.5                   | 4.78*    |
| Afraid   | 77.8                  | 80.9                      | 74.5                   | 0.79     |
| Like you couldn't trust people                   | 74.0                  | 72.7                      | 75.3                   | 0.11     |
| Embarrassed                                      | 64.6                  | 72.6                      | 56.2                   | 3.97*    |
| Ashamed  | 54.5                  | 61.3                      | 47.4                   | 2.31     |
| Like you were alone                              | 49.0                  | 51.5                      | 46.4                   | 0.29     |
| Sad  | 48.7                  | 54.8                      | 42.3                   | 1.82     |
| Flattered  | 24.5                  | 24.8                      | 24.2                   | 0.005    |
| Because of what happened did you...              |                       |                           |                        |          |
| Avoid people at school, work, or anywhere else   | 25.1                  | 33.8                      | 15.9                   | 5.89*    |
| Have trouble concentrating at school or work     | 23.1                  | 25.1                      | 20.9                   | 0.27     |
| Lose any friends                                 | 12.9                  | 8.6                       | 17.4                   | 2.80     |
| Stay at home more often                          | 12.3                  | 10.4                      | 14.4                   | 0.70     |
| See a doctor or counselor                        | 6.4                   | 9.6                       | 3.1                    |          |
| Drink alcohol more often                         | 5.7                   | 2.6*                      | 8.9                    | 5.37*    |
| Get worse grades or get behind at work           | 5.3                   | 5.0                       | 5.7                    | 0.05     |
| Skip school or classes                           | 5.1                   | 5.7                       | 4.5                    | 0.16     |
| Did anything positive result from what happened? |                       |                           |                        | 0.66     |
| Yes  | 18.4                  | 13.0                      | 24.0                   |          |
| No   | 81.6                  | 87.0                      | 76.0                   |          |

\* $p < .05$ .

helpful and 27.1% thought the app or website did something unhelpful. Reasons why juveniles and adults did not report the incident to the website or app were similar. The most common reason was that the situation stopped before it got to that point (44.6%). One-third said the reason was they did not think it would help (33.3%), felt it was not a big deal (31.7%), or that it didn't occur to them (31.5%). One in 10 said they were afraid the person who threatened them would find out (10.8%), worried their report would not be anonymous (10.2%), or were embarrassed or ashamed or worried about being judged (10.1%). Some cyberstalking victims (5.9%) said there wasn't anywhere to report it and 2.0% couldn't figure out how to make a report.

Only 1 in 20 cyberstalking victims (4.8%,  $n = 24$ ) reported the situation to the police or police found out some other way. Adult victims were substantially more likely to report the situation to the police compared to juvenile victims, 10.9% compared to 1.0%,  $\chi^2(1, 331) = 16.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . One-third (36.6%) of those who reported to the police said the police did something helpful in response, such as contacted the person responsible, conducted an investigation, were sympathetic, or gave them resources. Half of those who reported to the police said the police did something

unhelpful in response, such as they felt blamed, felt situation wasn't taken seriously, police did not understand, or police said they could not do anything.

## **Discussion**

This study compared the characteristics and dynamics of cyberstalking committed against juveniles and young adults. We found more similarities than differences. Overall, we found that 23.5% of respondents experienced stalking, either online or in person, which is comparable to the NIPSV (Smith et al., 2022). Half of the victims first experienced stalking when they were juveniles, which is higher than the NIPSV, which found one in four females and one in five males first experienced stalking when they were 17 or younger (Smith et al., 2022). The difference could be because the NIPSV sample includes adults over 28, whereas our sample included adults up to 28 years old.

Our analytic sample was those who experienced cyberstalking and we found half of cyberstalking victims first experienced it when they were juveniles and half first experienced it when they were adults. Because we could not find any studies that compared cyberstalking when first experienced by juveniles compared to adults, more research is needed to understand whether and how cyberstalking differs for these groups and how our findings compare to others. Other research shows those who previously experienced other forms of victimization, whether in person (Kalaitzaki, 2020; Marganski & Melander, 2015) or online (Kraft & Wang, 2010; Maran & Begotti, 2019) appear to be more likely to experience cyber harassment. Dekeseredy et al. (2019) found that females who had reported cyberstalking were 2.3 times more likely to report a sexual assault than non-victims.

We found two out of five cyberstalking victims were male. This is consistent with the literature that finds females were more often victims of cyberstalking, but also finds males are just as likely to be victims of cyberstalking in some studies (Wilson et al., 2023). Consistent with cyberbullying research, there was a particularly high representation of non-heterosexuals (31.4%) among cyberstalking victims, even at younger ages (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). Juvenile cyberstalking victims were significantly more likely to be White, non-Hispanic compared to adult victims. It could be that Black, non-Hispanic, and Hispanic youth have less access to social media. A literature review found digital inequalities continue to exist and are connected to structural inequalities (Maceviciute & Wilson, 2018). There was a wide range in how many times cyberstalking had ever happened, one-third of victims said it happened one time but about 1 in 10 said it happened 10 times or more. There was no difference by age group in how many times cyberstalking was first committed.

There were many similarities in the characteristics of cyberstalking incidents committed against juveniles and adults. For both groups, there was a wide range in how long the incident had been going on, with about one-third of incidents lasting 1 week or less but one in five lasted more than 6 months. Two-thirds of victims knew the identity of the perpetrator. Most often the person was an acquaintance or a current or former intimate partner. This is similar to other research that finds

acquaintances or current/former intimate partners are most often perpetrators (Smith et al., 2022). One notable difference between cyberstalking committed against juveniles versus adults was that juveniles were significantly more likely to have more than two people involved compared to incidents committed against adults. This could be because the nature of cyberstalking differs for juveniles and adults. Younger victims may be more likely to be targeted by groups of peers because they are perceived as different or vulnerable. Juveniles may also be more likely to participate in online group interactions that may start as wanted contacts but then evolve into cyberstalking. Indeed, juvenile crime in general is more likely to be a group offense (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

It was notable that the specific actions taken on social media by perpetrators were generally very similar for incidents committed against juveniles versus adults. The most common actions were repeated online contact after being asked to stop sending “needy” or demanding messages. Unwanted contact was generally via text messages or social networking sites and not via dating sites or anonymous online chat sites. However, there were two important differences. Juvenile victims experienced more violent threats, while adult victims had more perpetrators pretend to be someone they were not. While it is not clear why these differences exist, it is concerning that more juveniles are experiencing threats of physical violence, as research has suggested that fear generated by physical injury, and likely the threat of injury, can be an especially impactful characteristic of victimization for youth (Turner et al., 2015). More research exploring how perpetrators use social media and what they say is needed. As Kaur and colleagues’ review of cyberstalking (2021) noted, few studies have examined the types of activities perpetrators take on social media.

In addition to experiencing more violent threats, juveniles were more likely to be embarrassed and concerned about others finding out, suggesting that the perceived social ramifications of this form of victimization may be especially salient for youth. Adults, on the other hand, were more likely to be angry and to drink alcohol more often as a result of what happened. The consequences of cybervictimization are profound. Although suicidal behavior was not measured in this study, a review of 21 studies on adolescent students found suicidal ideations and attempts were significantly more prevalent in cyberbullying victims (Buelga et al., 2022). Research shows the negative impact of cyberstalking on the victims’ well-being appears similar to that of offline stalking (Dreßing et al., 2014).

Nearly one in five cyberstalking victims reported something positive as a result of what happened. It is encouraging that juveniles were significantly more likely to report that they learned how to protect themselves compared to adults. Few reported the incident to either the website of app or to police. Adults were more likely to report to police, perhaps a sign of more self-efficacy. But reports to police were generally rare for victims of any age. This is similar to other studies that find low rates of reporting (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Burham & Wright, 2012; Fisher et al., 2016; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2014). Reasons victims did not report the situation to the website or app were similar for juveniles and adults. They most often said the situation stopped before it got to that point, they did not think it would help, felt it was not a big deal,

or that it didn't occur to them. Low reporting rates clearly suggest room to empower and incentivize victims to engage in more reporting.

### *Limitations*

This study comes with some limitations that should be kept in mind. The sample of episodes is not entirely representative of the population because the study limit of two episode follow-ups meant that some episodes did not get selected for inclusion. Priority for follow-up was given to juvenile episodes so these are overrepresented and likely more diverse. In addition, information was gathered about episodes that could have been as many as 15 years in the past (a 28-year-old recalling about something at age 13), so recall bias could be a problem, and more so for the juvenile than the adult episodes. Another limitation is that technology and interactional platforms continue to change at a rapid rate so that episode dynamics from an earlier era may not correspond to what is occurring today. The adult-experienced episodes generally occurred in a more recent technology environment than the youth episodes, which may account for differences. Nonetheless, this is a sample of cases from a largely representative sample of young people during a somewhat circumscribed technology era and are thus worthy of consideration. Future studies should try to access current representative juvenile populations to compare simultaneously with young adult populations.

### *Implications*

Several findings were noteworthy for their implications. The greater violence and general seriousness of cyberstalking against juveniles highlights how important it is to focus on juvenile victims and include findings for this population in studies and policy reviews on the general topic. An obvious implication is that cyberstalking prevention and intervention need to be included in bullying prevention and data violence prevention programs that are created for juvenile populations. The greater difficulty that juveniles appear to have in accessing police is also noteworthy and suggests the police need to expand and signal their willingness and availability to help youth deal with these situations. This could be through school resource officers or more general public awareness campaigns.

There has been limited scholarly work on effective strategies for the prevention of cyberstalking (Kaur et al., 2021). To help close this gap, Dhillon and Smith (2019) systematically interviewed over 100 individuals to identify how individuals feel about the problem of cyberstalking and how it can be managed. They identified the following five objectives for preventing cyberstalking: protecting online interactions; establishing cyberstalking security procedures; establishing technical security; developing early detection and curbing of negative behaviors through parental engagement; and defining intermediaries to monitor and protect personal information. Dhillon and Smith (2019) propose three distinct categories for preventing cyberstalking: cultural (i.e., social etiquette, increasing awareness of cyberstalking consequences); procedural (i.e., increasing responsibility and regulation of social media sites); and technical



(i.e., decreasing tracking ability). Other research shows that individuals want to have clear regulations, policies, and procedures against cyberstalking developed in collaboration with industry and enforced by the government (Smith & Dhillon, 2022). A number of websites exist focused on preventing cyberstalking (i.e., <https://www.cybereason.com/cyber-stalking-prevention> and <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/issue/how-avoid-becoming-cyberstalking-victim>). These websites mention limiting personal information, resetting passwords, checking privacy settings, trusting your instincts, keeping evidence, blocking, and going to the police. Many of these efforts appear to overlook the fact that most perpetrators, as found in the current study, are close acquaintances or intimate partners. While we agree with objectives outlined by these other researchers, our research also suggests that efforts might be tailored differently for juvenile and adult victims.

## Conclusion

Using a nationally representative sample, this article found half of cyberstalking victims first experienced it as juveniles and half first experienced it when they were adults. Important key differences between these two groups were that juveniles were more likely to have more than two perpetrators in the same episode, they experienced more violent threats, and they were less likely to report this to the police. This is concerning because youth have not reached cognitive maturation and are an especially vulnerable group (Nightingale & Fischhoff, 2002). Rather than cyberstalking getting more serious with age, cyberstalking of juveniles appears just as or more serious than cyberstalking of adults.

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**Heather A. Turner** is a Professor of Sociology and Senior Research Associate at the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. Dr. Turner's research program has concentrated on social stress processes and mental health, including the effects of violence, victimization, and other forms of adversity on the social and psychological development of children and adolescents. Dr. Turner has over 20 years of research experience on childhood exposure to violence, has conducted numerous national surveys, and published over 150 articles.