



## Stalking is all too common; reporting isn't

***By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott***

Aided by technologies that make it easy to track victims online and in real life, stalking is a growing and often deadly crime that largely targets young people.

Thirty years ago, the term “stalker” was hardly known. Today, more than 1 million victims are stalked every year, most of them women and most of them under 25. Their stalkers are usually someone they know – an ex-boyfriend, a date, or someone at work – and 80 to 90 percent of stalkers are male.

Parents need to be especially vigilant. Children may not recognize the point when a romantic interest in them becomes an obsession or an unrequited crush leads to a desire to control and harm.

Stalking can occur in many ways, but here are some commonly identified tactics:

- Following and watching of the victim;
- Showing up uninvited in places such as the victim's home, workplace, or school;
- Repeatedly seeking information from friends and family;
- Sneaking into the victim's home or car to scare the victim or let the victim know he'd been there;
- Making repeated phone calls, including hang-ups and voice messages; and
- Sending unwanted texts, emails, social media messages, cards, letters, flowers, or presents.

Advances in technology add more tools to a stalker's toolbox.

Stalkers use social media profiles to monitor the habits, preferences, and likely whereabouts of their victims. They use hidden cameras and recorders to spy on victims and the Internet to post threats or virtually harass them. Global positioning system (GPS) technology allows stalkers to track a victim's location. Small GPS devices, like Apple AirTags, can be dropped into a purse or a car window.

My Office prosecuted one stalker who'd attached a GPS device to the bottom of his victim's car. He was caught on a home surveillance camera as he checked on the device while the car sat in the victim's driveway.

In another case, the victim got aggressive and threatening texts from her ex, including photos of her damaged car with messages like “this is just the start.”

As with many stalking victims, she changed her phone number. The stalker, consistently persistent, found her new number and contact her 400 times in one day, threatening violence against her, her son, and her ex-husband.

When a restraining order failed to stop the conduct, my Office filed a criminal complaint alleging stalking, annoying or harassing communications, and vandalism. The defendant pleaded guilty to the stalking charge. He was sentenced to 60 days in jail, three years of probation, and a 52-week counseling class, and is the subject of a 10-year Criminal Protective Order.

In 1991, California became the first state to make stalking illegal, though the law primarily referred to obsessively pursuing celebrities. It was later expanded, and today, every state has stalking laws.

Stalking may be charged as a felony or a misdemeanor, depending on the facts. My Office handles misdemeanors, and we take all such incidents seriously. We recognize that victims can experience psychological distress, including post-traumatic stress and an increase in suicidal thoughts.

Before we can prosecute, however, we must hear from the victim. Most stalking incidents are not reported out of fear, embarrassment, or a failure to recognize that the behavior is a crime.

If you are a victim or hear about repeated incidents of stalking behavior, please report it to the police. They can investigate, identify the stalker, and take steps to keep you safe. This could include seeking restraining orders, arresting the stalker, or adding patrols to your home or workplace. In some cases, police officers may recommend counseling or other support services to help the victim.

As with any behavior where someone tries to assert power over you, being stalked is a terrifying experience that can take a huge emotional toll -- or prove lethal. Calling 911 is not an overreaction.

In addition, my Office's [Your Safe Place – A Family Justice Center](#) offers a safe, supportive environment for victims of stalkers who also experience domestic violence, family violence, or sexual assault. You can find out more at 619-533-6000.