

# STALKING & ABUSE IN LATER LIFE

Stalking impacts people of all ages, including older adults. While research specific to stalking among older adults is limited, it's clear that this crime is not limited to younger victims — more than a million people over the age of 50 are stalked each year.<sup>1</sup> **Older victims of stalking often face ageist biases and are less likely to be believed than younger victims.** Because multiple forms of abuse in later life often co-occur and intersect, it is important to identify and address the full scope of a survivor's experience — including stalking behaviors that often accompany other abuse.



## WHAT IS ABUSE IN LATER LIFE?

Abuse in later life is the willful abuse, neglect, abandonment, or financial exploitation of an adult (age 50+) by someone in an ongoing, trust-based relationship (i.e., spouse, partner, family member, or caregiver) with the victim, as well as sexual abuse of an older adult by anyone. This can be physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment, and financial exploitation of an older person by another person or entity, that occurs in any setting (i.e., home, community, or facility).



## WHAT IS STALKING?

Stalking is a pattern of behavior directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear and/or to suffer substantial emotional distress. Common stalking tactics include surveillance, excessive contact, invading privacy, sabotage, property damage, and other behaviors that cause fear. What is frightening to one person may not be frightening to another. Acts that may be harmless in a different context may become menacing due to their repetitiveness or intrusiveness, or because of the history of violence in the relationship between stalker and victim.



## INTERSECTIONS

**Stalking may be a tactic of abuse.** If someone victimizes an older adult with a pattern of behavior such as: constant phone calls, showing up at their home, threatening to harm them or their family, hacking into their accounts and controlling finances, spreading rumors about them, breaking into their vehicle — **that's elder abuse AND stalking.**

Stalking can be part of domestic violence that targets an older person, whether intimate partner violence or child-to-parent violence, such as monitoring and/or restricting location, activities, and other relationships; public shaming, embarrassment, or humiliation; withholding access to medical care; restricting access to finances — **that's abuse in later life AND stalking AND domestic violence.**

### MOST COMMON STALKING TACTICS EXPERIENCED BY VICTIMS:

75%  UNWANTED PHONE CALLS

APPROACHED/SHOWED UP  57%

57%  TEXTS, EMAILS, MESSAGES

FOLLOWED & WATCHED  52%

26%  SENT GIFTS, CARDS, LETTERS

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Individuals who rely on caregivers — whether family members, home health aides, nursing home staff, or others — are vulnerable to abuse from them. Older adults may be reluctant to report any abuse from caregivers because they provide essential support, they think nobody will believe them over the caregiver’s denials, and/or the caregiver has threatened them. If caregivers commit two or more acts of abuse — physical, sexual, emotional, or financial — against an older individual that would frighten a reasonable person, **that’s abuse in later life AND stalking.**

Stalking includes a wide range of threatening and disturbing behaviors, and many types of elder abuse may include stalking behaviors — from psychological abuse to financial exploitation. Below are examples of stalking behaviors within different types of elder abuse; remember that most of these can be done in-person or through technology.

### PHYSICALLY VIOLENT STALKING BEHAVIORS MAY INCLUDE:

- Physical attack on victim
- Physical mistreatment
- Physically harming those close to the victim
- False imprisonment / preventing from leaving
- Sabotaging dietary restrictions
- Withholding or sabotaging medication, medical care, assistance with activities of daily living, and/or assistive devices
- Tampering with assistive devices (deflating wheelchair, removing batteries from hearing aids)

*Elder abuse victims who experience physical abuse are abused by: strangers 3%, acquaintances 19%, children/grandchildren 10%, partner/spouse 57%<sup>iii</sup>*

### SEXUALLY VIOLENT STALKING BEHAVIORS MAY INCLUDE:

- Sexually assaulting the victim
- Sexually assaulting those close to the victim
- Sharing intimate images of the victim, or threatening to do so
- Sexually harassing the victim
- Stealing or destroying sexual items (i.e., lubricant, lingerie, toys)
- Impersonating victim online to solicit sexual activity that is not wanted
- Spreading sexual rumors about the victim

*Elder abuse victims who experience sexual abuse are abused by: strangers 3%, other relatives 12%, acquaintances 40%, partner/spouse 40%<sup>iii</sup>*



## EXPLOITING TRUST

By definition, abuse in later life differs from elder abuse (a more general term) in that the offender has a relationship with the victim in which there is an expectation of trust. **The majority of stalkers know their victims** and are intimate partners (current or former) or acquaintances,<sup>iv</sup> where the same expectations and relationships are exploited. **The more access to and information about the victim that the offender has, the more dangerous and threatening they are likely to be.** The trust and relationship history make it likely that offender has access to and/or information about the victim, which can be exploited.

## PSYCHOLOGICALLY VIOLENT STALKING BEHAVIORS MAY INCLUDE:

- Excessive contact – phone calls, voicemails, text messages, social media messages
- Breaking into victim’s home or vehicle and leaving signs they were there
- Threats to harm victim or those close to the victim
- Spreading rumors
- Publicly shaming, embarrassing, humiliating, and/or objectifying the victim
- Invading privacy – watching victim, hacking into accounts, planting or accessing cameras or recording devices, tracking the victim’s location
- Showing up where victim is
- Following victim
- Harassing the victim’s friends, family
- Blackmailing the victim
- Convincing or blackmailing the victim to change their will, power of attorney, health care directive, or other legal documents
- Threats of deportation or other legal threats
- Threats to retaliate if the victim reports the abuse
- Changing passwords, moving items around in the house, and/or lying to make the victim doubt their memory and state of mind
- Threats of institutionalization, for example placing the victim in a nursing home or care center

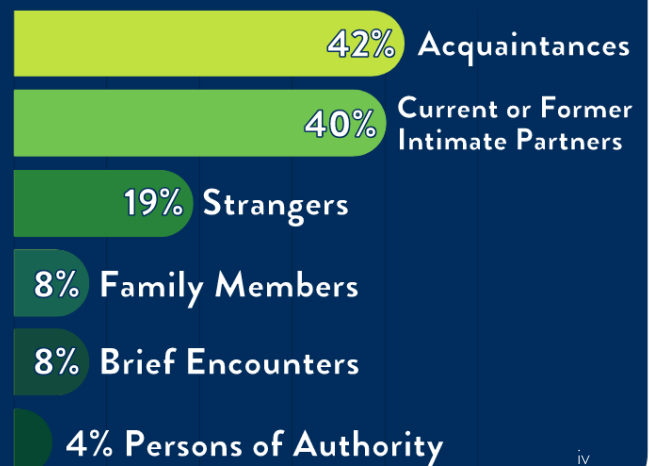
*Elder abuse victims who experience emotional mistreatment are abused by: strangers 9%, other relative 13%, children/grandchildren 19%, acquaintance 25%, partner/spouse 25% <sup>iii</sup>*

## FINANCIALLY EXPLOITATIVE STALKING BEHAVIORS MAY INCLUDE:

- Hacking into accounts and spending/moving money without permission
- Blackmail – securing intimate or private information or images of the victim, threatening to release if not paid
- Theft, burglary, vandalism
- Stealing or withholding finances the victim is entitled to – for example, social security money or a pension
- Extortion using family members (i.e., withholding access to grandchildren unless paid a certain amount)

*Elder abuse victims who experience financial abuse: 5% from family members <sup>iii</sup>*

### AMONG ALL ADULT VICTIMS, STALKERS ARE:



## CO-OCCURRING CRIMES

Many stalkers commit multiple crimes during their pattern of behavior. As the criminal justice system is largely incident-based, stalking is often missed as responders focus on single incidents and don’t appropriately consider the context of the situation. Similarly, crimes against older adults are often absorbed under the umbrella term “elder abuse” and victims do not receive the appropriate response or services for specific victimizations.

Consider [screening for stalking victimization](#) when responding to victims of elder abuse who experience harassment, intimate partner and family violence, protection order violations, sexual assault, sexual harassment, theft/burglary, voyeurism, trespassing, property crimes, and/or other offenses.

Some offenders stalk in order to commit another crime. For example, offenders may engage in surveillance to gather information about when a victim is alone and vulnerable in order to commit sexual assault, or build relationships/groom their victims through multiple contacts to gain the information or leverage to then financially exploit them.

Connecting the dots to recognize that these individual victimizations may form a larger stalking course of conduct can better increase victim safety and offender accountability.

**CRIMES INCLUDING (BUT NOT LIMITED TO)**

<p><b>IDENTITY THEFT, COMPUTER CRIMES</b></p> 	<p><b>VANDALISM, PROPERTY CRIMES</b></p> 	<p><b>VOYEURISM, PRIVACY VIOLATION, IMAGE CREATION/DISTRIBUTION</b></p> 	<p><b>EAVESDROPPING, TRESPASSING, NONCONSENSUAL RECORDING</b></p> 	<p><b>FALSE REPORTS, WITNESS INTIMIDATION</b></p> 
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**MAY BE PART OF A STALKER'S COURSE OF CONDUCT**

## TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED STALKING

The impact of technology-facilitated stalking can be vast and just as invasive, threatening, and fear-inducing as in-person stalking. Victims of technology-facilitated stalking report being just as concerned for their safety as individuals who experience in-person stalking.<sup>v</sup> Technologies and tactics used by abusers constantly evolve and may seem impossible or unrealistic when you first hear about them; but stalkers are creative in the pervasive ways they monitor, surveil, contact, control, and isolate victims, as well as the ways they damage victims' credibility or reputation. Technologies used to stalk vary from location tracking devices and software to online communication to recording devices. Whether or not older adults use technology frequently, they may be stalked using technology.

**Remember that many older adults use technology on a regular basis:<sup>vi</sup>**

- 80% own cell phones, 40% own smartphones
- 67% of adults aged 65+ use the internet and 34% use social media
- Younger seniors (65-69) have significantly higher rates of technology use than older seniors
- Younger seniors use the internet and subscribe to home broadband at comparable rates to the overall population



## INTIMATE PARTNER STALKING AND ELDER ABUSE

Intimate partner violence is rarely identified when it occurs among older adults, and many support programs are not designed with the needs of older adults in mind. About 40% of stalkers are current or former intimate partners,<sup>iv</sup>



### DURATION

Generally, intimate partner violence and stalking escalate over time. A stalking case can last from an afternoon to a lifetime; the longer the duration of the stalking, the more severe the mental health impacts. Older adults may have experienced years of stalking and/or abuse.

who stalk as an extension of power and control. When a victim experiences IPV and stalking, they are more likely to experience sexual violence, physical violence, and homicide. In fact, intimate partner stalking increases the risk of intimate partner homicide by more than three times.<sup>vii</sup> As intimate partner stalking is an indicator that the abusive relationship may be particularly violent and dangerous, it is critical to identify stalking when it co-occurs with intimate partner violence for victims of all ages.

## TARGETING BASED ON AGE OR DISABILITY

Stalkers choose their targets intentionally, often selecting victims based on their perceived vulnerabilities and/or lack of credibility. Many older adults experience — or are assumed to experience — vulnerabilities including (but not limited to) isolation, limited mobility, physical limitations, health issues and reliance on medication and health care, mental disabilities, memory loss, and/or limited proficiency with technology. Stalkers may be family members, caretakers, or even strangers who identify and exploit these weaknesses.

Stereotypes about older adults being mentally incapable, easily confused, and/or having co-occurring mental health disorders can lead responders to take reports from older adults less seriously. Stalkers are likely to target older adults because these victims are less likely to be considered credible. Older victims are also the least likely subgroup to be aided by family and friends.<sup>viii</sup>

Recognize that a victim may have a co-occurring mental health, substance use, or other disorder **and still be a victim of stalking**. For example, a victim with dementia may hear voices as a symptom of their disorder **and** accurately report that the stalker is speaking to them through a smart device like an Alexa or Nest camera. Each stalking incident in the course of conduct should be individually considered and investigated.

### STALKING AS ELDER ABUSE



Stalking can also be a form of elder abuse committed by someone outside of the context of a trusting relationship. While the majority of stalkers know their victims, approximately 20% of offenders are strangers and 8% are brief encounters.<sup>iv</sup> Without knowing them well, these stalkers may target older adults as victims based on perceived vulnerabilities and lack of credibility.

## BARRIERS TO REPORTING

**In the general population, fewer than 30% of stalking victims report to law enforcement.**<sup>i</sup> Among elder abuse victims, only 31% of those who experienced physical mistreatment reported to police, along with only 16% of those who experienced sexual abuse and only 8% of those who experienced emotional mistreatment.<sup>iii</sup> Fear of losing independence may make older adults reluctant to report.

Many of the common reasons that victims do not report can be exacerbated by the ageism that older adults experience, for example:

- **Fear of not being believed**
  - Older victims worry about being told they are overreacting.
  - Older victims worry they won't be taken seriously by the police.
- **Minimization and/or self-doubt (i.e., “maybe I’m overreacting”)**
  - Older adults may doubt their situation is serious enough to call law enforcement and feel they would be bothering law enforcement who have “bigger” issues to deal with.
  - As neglect of older adults is a major issue, many older victims may think (or be told) that they “should feel flattered” by the attention.
  - Older adults — particularly those with memory loss and other limitations — may be inclined to doubt their experiences, incorrectly attributing interference from the stalker to their own difficulties (for example, a stalker changes the victim’s e-mail password and the victim assumes they must have done so themselves and simply forgotten).
- **Distrust or lack of faith in law enforcement and/or other authority figures**
  - Victims may not be confident that law enforcement will take them seriously. They may have had a negative experience in the past, be unwilling to go through the criminal justice process, or be from a marginalized community and/or have other concerns (like immigration status) that make them hesitant to engage with law enforcement.



## TIPS FOR RESPONDING/NEXT STEPS

Stalking is a criminal, traumatic, and violent victimization that requires an urgent response. Whenever a victim discloses an incident, it is critical to consider if it is an isolated experience or part of a larger course of conduct. Stalking victims are unlikely to use the words “stalking” or “fear” to describe their experiences and may instead say something like “my ex-husband is harassing me” or “a friend is acting weird.”

- 1) Screen for stalking when working with victims who are older adults, both intimate-partner related and not.

### Use these four stalking behavior screening questions:

- *Has anyone followed you, watched you, showed up unexpectedly, or communicated with you in ways that seem obsessive or make you concerned for your safety?*
- *Has anyone repeatedly initiated unwanted contact with you (for example, repeated phone calls, texts, messages, emails, gifts, etc., including through third parties)?*
- *Has anyone threatened you or done other things to intimidate you? What have they done that has frightened or alarmed you?*
- *Has anyone significantly and directly interfered with your life? Have they assaulted you while stalking, harassing, or threatening you? Have they forcibly kept you from leaving or held you against your will, caused you to have a serious accident, physically assaulted your friends (or family or community or pets), or seriously attacked you in other ways?*

If the answer to any of these four questions is “yes,” consider completing the full Stalking & Harassment Assessment & Risk Profile (SHARP). It is a web-based tool that examines risk factors and provides a situational risk profile (available at [www.CoerciveControl.org](http://www.CoerciveControl.org)).






- 2) Remember that older victims of stalking may be unable to leave or disengage from the abuser.
- 3) Recognize that stalkers often choose victims intentionally based on their perceived or actual vulnerabilities.
- 4) Stalkers may target older adults because of their assumption that responders, friends, and family will ignore, minimize, and/or not believe these particular victims.
- 5) [Conduct the SHARP risk assessment with stalking victims](#) and [safety plan specifically for stalking behaviors](#).
- 6) Most older adults use technology; [learn more about tech safety and older adults here](#).
- 7) Advise victims to document every incident with [an incident/documentation log](#).
- 8) Incorporate stalking awareness into educational efforts around elder abuse ([resources here](#)).
- 9) Learn more about stalking at [www.StalkingAwareness.org](http://www.StalkingAwareness.org).
- 10) Learn more about elder abuse at <https://www.ncall.us/>.



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<sup>i</sup> Morgan, R.E. & Truman, J.L. (2022). Stalking Victimization, 2019. Washington, DC: US DOJ, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/sv19.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Mohandie, K., Meloy, J.R., McGowan, M.G., & Williams, J. (2006). The RECON Typology of Stalking: Reliability and Validity Based upon a Large Sample of North American Stalkers. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 51(1): 147-155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-4029.2005.00030.x>

<sup>iii</sup> Acierno, R., Hernandez-Tejada, M., Muzzy, W., & Steve, K. (2009) National Elder Mistreatment Study. National Institute of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/226456.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Smith, S.G., Basile, K.C., & Kresnow, M. (2022). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2016/2017 Report on Stalking. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs/nisvsstalkingreport.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Fissel, E. R., & Reyns, B. W. (2020). The Aftermath of Cyberstalking: School, Work, Social, and Health Costs of Victimization. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(1), 70-87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-019-09489-1>

<sup>vi</sup> Anderson, M. & Perrin, A. (2017). Technology Use Among Seniors. Pew Research Center on Internet and Technology. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/17/technology-use-among-seniors/>

<sup>vii</sup> Spencer, C.M. & Stith, S.M. (2018). Risk Factors for Male Perpetration and Female Victimization of Intimate Partner Homicide: A Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 21(3): 527-540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018781101>

<sup>viii</sup> Sheridan, L., Scott, A., & North, A. (2014). Stalking and Age. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(4), 262-273. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/tam0000023>