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Lisa Fedina[a], Bethany L. Backes[b], Caitlin Sulley[b], Leila Wood[b], and Noël Busch-Armendariz[b]

[a]School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA; [b]Steve Hicks School of Social Work, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study's purpose was to examine the prevalence and sociodemographic factors associated with stalking victimization among a diverse sample of college students. **Participants:** Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey administered in November 2015 to students 18 and older on 8 academic universities in a Southwestern university system ($N = 26,417$). **Methods**: Descriptive statistics were used to assess the prevalence of stalking experiences across student populations. Multivariate logistic regression was used to examine associations between sociodemographic factors and stalking victimization. **Results:** A total of 17.4% of students reported stalking victimization since entering college. Cisgender females, transgender/gender-nonconforming, and sexual minority students had higher odds of stalking victimization than their counterparts, whereas Latino/a students had lower odds of stalking victimization compared to White nonHispanic students. **Conclusions:** A notable proportion of college students have experienced stalking. Disparities found among student populations are concerning and warrant further investigation.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 6 women (16.2%) and 1 in 19 men (5.2%) in the US have experienced stalking victimization in their lifetime.[1] Over half of female stalking victims and more than one-third of male stalking victims have been stalked before the age of 25 with many reporting stalking experiences between the ages of 11 and 17.[1] The majority of female stalking victims (66.2%) have perpetrators that are a current or former intimate partner[1] and stalking often coincides with other forms of intimate partner violence (IPV), including physical violence, psychological aggression, coercive control, and sexual assault.[2–4]

Prior research indicates varied rates of stalking among college students. Studies examining stalking at colleges and universities have found rates of victimization between 9 and 30%, with female students typically experiencing stalking at higher rates than male students. Rates of stalking across studies vary due to length of recall, sampling strategies, and stalking definitions used.[5,6] A number of risk factors are related to stalking victimization, some specific to college and universities, including a recent breakup;[7–10] identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native,[9,11] being an undergraduate or younger in age;[9,12–14] being a non-international student;[5,9] and prior sexual victimization.[5,9]

Despite an increase in stalking research over the past several years, extant research has primarily focused on cisgender white women and their experiences with intimate partner stalking with little to no information on stalking victimization prevalence and experiences of racial, ethnic, or gender and sexual minorities.[15] Although there has been an increase in the number of studies focused on the victimization experiences of specific subpopulations (eg transgender, American Indian), few have focused on stalking victimization and instead examine aspects of physical or sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination.[15,16] Yet, racial, ethnic, and gender minorities are experiencing interpersonal violence, including stalking, at rates much higher than their White and heterosexual counterparts. For example, findings from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) indicate that American Indian and Alaska Native women and men experience stalking at higher rates than other races[1,11] as well as women identifying as multiracial or Black and among men identifying as Black.[1] However, the types of stalking behaviors experienced by victims do not typically differ across race or ethnicity.[11]

Given the early onset of stalking, examining such incidents and experiences within young adult populations is critical to understanding the impact of stalking and the development of appropriate response and safety strategies. Specifically, an improved understanding of the correlates of stalking victimization and potential risk factors for traditionally marginalized and understudied groups can assist colleges and universities in developing intervention mechanisms to meet the needs of their student body. Further, results from prior research on

the prevalence of stalking among college students are mixed, including stalking victimization among student subpopulations (eg racial/ethnic minority students, sexual, and gender minority students). Therefore, the current study seeks to expand knowledge on the prevalence and sociodemographic factors associated with stalking victimization within college and university settings.

Using data from a cross-sectional study across eight southwestern universities, this study investigates the association between sociodemographic factors and stalking victimization since entering college in a large, demographically diverse sample of college students. Three research questions guided this study: (1) what is the prevalence of stalking since entering college among sampled college students, (2) what is the prevalence of stalking since entering college among student sub-populations based on sociodemographics and student characteristics, and (3) what sociodemographic aspects of identity (ie race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation) are associated with stalking victimization since entering college, adjusting for other student characteristics (ie current age, student type, foreign, or US born, international student status, current living situation)?

Method

Participants and procedures

Cross-sectional data for this study were collected from students 18 and older from eight universities in one Southwestern university system. The range of student enrollment at each university ranged between 4,000 to over 50,000. Data were collected as part of larger study examining the prevalence of interpersonal violence and student perceptions of campus climate (ie Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative [ARC3] survey). At seven of the universities, a random sample of students taken from campus registrar records was used and at census sample was used at one small university. An anonymous web-based survey was administered via Qualtrics. An initial invitation to complete the survey was sent via email, with up to four email reminders sent to participants who had not yet completed the survey.

The survey was advertised as a wellness and safety survey, rather than a victimization survey, to mitigate potential response bias.[17] Behaviorally specific measures were used to ask about dating violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and stalking and participants were asked about experiences that occurred since enrollment at their university. Three separate survey pathways were used to reduce length and participants were randomized to one version. Incentives drawings were used at each university, with prizes selected by a university working group. The survey was fielded in November of 2015 and took ~20–40 minutes to complete. Across all universties, 186,790 students were invited to participate and 26% of those invited began the survey. The total sample across all universities was 26,417 for an average response rate of 26% and average survey completion rate of 14%. Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the study and study participants gave informed consent. Participation in the study was voluntary, confidential, and participants could end the survey at any time. See Authors (2017) for more extensive methodological detail on the study.[18]

Measures

Sociodemographics

Sociodemographic factors included racial and ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Additional student characteristics included current age, student type (undergraduate or graduate), living situation (on or off campus), US or foreign-born, and international student status and were included as covariates in the multivariate analysis. Racial and ethnic identity was assessed with a single question consisting of six response options (ie White non-Hispanic, Black, or African American, Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN), Asian, Biracial/Multiracial) and was dummy coded using White non-Hispanic as the reference group for the multivariate analysis. Gender identity was assessed as a single question with multiple response options and was recoded to indicate cisgender male (0), cisgender female (1) or transgender or gender-non-conforming (2) (ie transgender female, transgender male, gender queer, gender non-conforming, intersex, two spirit, or other not listed) and was dummy coded for the multivariate analysis. Sexual orientation was recoded to indicate heterosexual (0) or sexual minority (1) (ie gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, other not listed). Current age was treated as a continuous variable. Student type was recoded into a dichotomous variable indicating postgraduate (0) (ie post baccalaureate, Master's, Doctoral, or other professional program) or undergraduate (1). Dichotomous indicators were used to assess whether the student lives on or off campus (0 = no; 1 = yes), was born in the US or was foreign born (0 = US; 1 = foreign), and was an international or non-interational student (0 = non-international; 1 = international).

Stalking victimization

Stalking victimization was assessed using eight items adapted from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) to assess stalking victimization since entering college.[19] Items included categorical response options indicating the number of times someone had done the behavior to them (ie none, once, twice, three-five, six-eight, more than eight). The stalking measure demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in the current study sample (Cronbach's alpha = 0.77). Items were combined into a single variable to indicate any experience with stalking victimization since entering college (0 = no; 1 = yes). Students who positively endorsed items were prompted to answer follow-up questions about their perceived most impactful stalking incident since entering college including: (a) location (on or off campus); (b) the perpetrator relationship to the victim; (c) whether the victim was using alcohol or drugs just prior to the incident; (d) whether the victim knew if the perpetrator had used alcohol or drugs just prior to the incident; and

Table 1. Description of stalking experiences since entering college ($N = 26417$).

	%	n
Overall prevalence of any stalking	17.1	2939
Number of stalking behaviors reported[a]		
One	47.8	1404
Two	23.5	692
Three	13.8	407
Four	6.6	194
Five or more	8.2	242
Types of stalking behaviors experienced[a]		
Left unwanted voice or text messages	44.6	1285
Sent unwanted emails, instant messages, or messages through social media	44.4	1283
Approached or showed up at places when they did not want them to be there	37.2	1070
Made unwanted phone calls	33.5	965
Watched or followed them at a distance or spied on them with a device	30.6	864
Left cards, letters, presents, or flowers when they knew the victim did not want them	12.7	360
Left strange or threatening items for them to find	7.8	223
Sneaked into home/car and did things to scare them to let them know they were there	6.2	178
Stalking incident characteristics of most impactful experience[a]		
Location—on campus	46.1	1450
Location—off campus	53.9	1695
Perpetrator was a stranger	32	998
Perpetrator was an acquaintance	28.8	908
Perpetrator was a friend	14.5	450
Perpetrator was a former/current romantic partner	13.3	414
Perpetrator was a student at IHE	53.6	1692
Perpetrator was not a student at IHE	26.7	842
Victim did not know if perpetrator was a student at IHE	19.7	612
Victim was not using alcohol/drugs prior to the incident	92.1	2875
Perpetrator was not using alcohol/drugs prior to the incident	26.5	838
Victim did not know if perpetrator was using alcohol/drugs prior to the incident	60.5	1898

IHE: Institute of Higher Education.
[a]Rates reflected among those reporting stalking experiences since entering college.

(e) whether the perpetrator was a student at the victim's same university (see Supplementary File for full stalking victimization measure).

Data analyses

All analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 22. Univariate analyses were used to describe stalking victimization experiences among students. Chi-square and t-tests analyses were conducted to examine bivariate correlations between sociodemographics and stalking victimization, including prevalence among sub-populations of students based on race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Logistic regression was used to model associations between sociodemographics and stalking victimization, adjusting for other variables. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion. Missing data were less than 5% on all study variables, with the exception of 36% missing on the outcome variable of stalking victimization ($N = 9,497$). Missing data were analyzed and demographic information (ie age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, student type, international student status, and living situation) were compared between participants with complete and missing data on the outcome variable, however, no significant differences were found.

Results

Sample description

Demographic sample descriptives are presented in Tables 1 and 2 ($N = 26,417$). A total of 17.4% of students in the sample reported stalking victimization since entering college. Rates of stalking varied across universties included in the study and ranged from 11.5 to 21.1%. Among students exposed to stalking victimization, approximately half (47.8%) reported experiencing one stalking behavior, followed by two behaviors (23.5%), three behaviors (13.8%), five or more behaviors (8.2%), and four behaviors (6.6%) by any perpetrator since entering college. Students who experienced stalking reported that the perpetrator had: left unwanted voice or text messages (44.6%); sent unwanted emails, instant messages, or messages through social media (44.4%); approached them or showed up at places when they did not want them to be there (37.2%); made unwanted phone calls (33.5%); watched or followed them at a distance or spied on them with a device (30.6%); left cards, letters, presents, or flowers when they knew the victim did not want them (12.7%); left strange or threatening items for them to find (7.8%); and sneaked into their home or car and did things to scare them to let them know they were there (6.2%). Some stalking behaviors were significantly more likely to occur on campus compared to off campus, including leaving strange or threatening items for the victim (1.7%, 1.2%, respectively) ($\chi^2 = 5.00$; $p < .05$) and approaching the victim or showing up in places when the victim did not want them to be there (8.1%, 5.9%, respectively) ($\chi^2 = 21.25$; $p < 0.001$).

In describing the most impactful stalking incident since entering college, a total of 46.1% of students reported that incident happened on campus whereas 53.9% reported that the incident happened off campus. A total of 32% of victims reported that the perpetrator was a stranger, followed by an acquaintance (28.8%), friend (14.5%), and a current or

Table 2. Sample descriptives and bivariate correlates between sociodemographics and stalking victimization ($N = 26417$).

	Total Sample		Stalking Victimization		
	%	n	%	n	Test statistic
Current age	Mean = 24.6 SD = 8.06		Mean = 22.7 SD = 5.80		$t = 13.73$***
Race/ethnicity					$\chi^2 = 17.22$**
Black or African American	6.1	1614	15.9	137	
Latino/a	41	10832	16.4	1105	
Asian	16.9	4454	18.1	502	
AIAN	1.1	291	22.6	42	
Biracial/multiracial	3.3	865	21.2	118	
White non-Hispanic	38.4	10138	18	1025	
Gender identity					$\chi^2 = 202.86$***
Cisgender female	63.3	16726	20.2	2169	
Cisgender male	35.3	9334	11.9	708	
Transgender/nonconforming	1.3	346	29	61	
Sexual orientation					$\chi^2 = 65.56$***
Sexual minority	11.2	2956	24.1	456	
Heterosexual	88.2	23305	16.5	2471	
Student type					$\chi^2 = 35.47$***
Undergraduate	75.1	19831	18.4	2338	
Post-baccalaureate/graduate	24.9	6578	14.3	601	
International student					$\chi^2 = 1.41, p=.24$
Yes	10.5	2780	18.4	328	
No	89.4	23610	17.3	2610	
US born					$\chi^2 = 3.84, p=.05$
Yes	74.3	19632	17.5	2220	
No	20.7	5458	16.1	566	
Living situation					$\chi^2 = 12.78$***
On campus	18.9	5002	19.3	620	
Off campus	76.8	20301	16.7	2182	

AIAN: American Indian/Alaska Native.
***$p < 0.001$.

former intimate partner (13.3%). A total of 53.6% victims reported that the perpetrator was a student at their university, 26.7% reported that the perpetrator was not a student at their university, and 19.7% did not know if the perpetrator was a student at their university. Victims were also asked to indicate whether they had been using alcohol and/or drugs just prior to the incident as well as the perpetrator. The majority of victims had not been using drugs or alcohol prior to the incident (92.1%). Victims largely reported that they did not know whether the perpetrator had been using alcohol and/or drugs (60.5%), followed by 26.5% who reported that the perpetrator had not been using alcohol or drugs prior to the incident.

Prevalence of stalking victimization

Chi-square and *t*-test results suggest significant differences in prevalence of stalking victimization among student subpopulations based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. Sexual minority students (lesbian/gay/bisexual/gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, other not listed) reported significantly higher proportions of stalking victimization (24.1%) since entering college compared to heterosexual students (16.5%) ($\chi^2 = 65.56$, $p < .001$). With regard to gender identity, transgender, and gender-nonconforming students reported the highest rates of stalking victimization (29.9%), followed by cisgender females (20.2%) and cisgender males (11.9%) ($\chi^2 = 202.86$; $p < .001$). With regard to race and ethnicity, AIAN students reported the highest rates of stalking victimization (22.6%), followed by Biracial/Multiracial (21.2%), Asian (18.1%), White non-

Hispanic (18%), Latino/a (16.4%), and Black or African American (15.9%) ($\chi^2 = 17.22$, $p < 0.001$).

Additional student characteristics did not reveal significant differences in stalking victimization at the bivariate level, with the exception of living situation and student type. Compared to students living off campus (16.7%), students living on campus reported significantly higher proportions of stalking victimization (19.3%) ($\chi^2 = 12.78$; $p < 0.001$). Undergraduate students (18.4%) reported higher proportions of stalking victimization compared to graduate students (14.3%) ($\chi^2 = 35.47$; $p < 0.001$) (see Table 2).

Multivariate associations between sociodemographics and stalking victimization

Results from logistic regression suggest that age, gender identity, sexual minority status, and noninternational student status were significantly associated with stalking victimization, adjusting for other variables in the model. Specifically, younger students had increased odds for stalking victimization than older students (OR = 0.95, 95% CI = 0.95, 0.96). Cisgender females had nearly twice the odds of experiencing stalking compared to cisgender males (OR = 1.94, 95% CI = 1.76, 2.13). Transgender/gender-nonconforming students had over twice the odds of stalking victimization exposures than cisgender males (OR = 2.15, 95% CI = 1.54, 3.01). Additionally, sexual minority students had increased odds of stalking victimization compared to heterosexual students (OR = 1.54, 95% CI = 1.36, 1.74). Non-international students had increased odds for stalking victimization compared to international students (OR = 1.56, 95% CI = 1.24, 1.83). With regard to race and

Table 3. Logistic regression results modeling associations between sociodemographics and stalking victimization ($N = 15732$).

Variable	OR	95% CI	
Current age***	0.95	0.95, 0.96	
Race/ethnicity[a]			
Black or African American	0.87	0.71, 1.04	
Latino/a***	0.80	0.73, 0.89	
Asian	0.89	0.77, 1.01	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.35	0.92, 1.07	
Biracial/Multiracial	1.14	0.91, 1.43	
Gender identity[b]			
Cisgender female***	1.94	1.76, 2.13	
Transgender/nonconforming***	2.15	1.54, 2.13	
Sexual orientation[c]***	1.56	1.36, 1.74	
Student type	1.04	0.92, 1.19	
International Student	1.56	1.24, 1.83	
US born	0.93	0.80, 1.07	
Living situation	0.93	0.84, 1.04	
Model fit	Nagelkerke R2	p	χ^2
	0.05	<0.001	480.82

[a]Reference group = White non-Hispanic.
[b]Reference group = cisgender males.
[c]Reference group = straight/heterosexual.
***$p < 0.001$.

ethnicity, Latino/a students had decreased odds of stalking victimization compared to White non-Hispanic students (OR = .80, 95% CI = .73, .89) (see Table 3). Student type (undergraduate or graduate), US born, and living situation (on or off-campus) were not significant in the model.

Comment

This study examined the prevalence and sociodemographic factors associated with stalking victimization since entering college in a large, demographically diverse sample of college students. Findings address knowledge gaps previously identified in research on stalking[11,15] and lends empirical support documenting concerning rates of stalking victimization among college students, including disparate rates of exposure among student subpopulations (ie American Indian/Alaska Native students, women, sexual minority students, transgender, and gender nonconforming students). The overall rate of stalking victimization since entering college (17.1%) in this sample is generally consistent with previous studies on stalking among female college students which ranged from 13.1 to 26%[5,9,20] and extends this knowledge to include victimization among male and transgender and gender non-conforming students. Notably, some studies have found much higher rates of stalking victimization among male and female college students. For example, McNamara and Marsil found that 42.5% of college students (45.4% female; 35.7% male) reported at least one behavior that consisted of stalking since entering college.[21] Methodological differences in sampling methods (eg convenience versus random samples) and differing measures of stalking victimization used in exant studies likely explain varying rates of stalking among students.

This study also found that notable differences exist in stalking victimization experiences among students based on aspects of sociodemographic identity. Specifically, Native students reported the highest rates of stalking victimization since entering college compared to other racial and ethnic groups. This finding is consistent with other studies documenting disproportionately high rates of stalking among American Indian/Alaska Native adults in the general population.[11,12] Reasons for these differences are not entirely clear, however, disproportionate rates of stalking among Native populations, in addition to other forms of interpersonal violence (eg IPV, rape), have been attributed to inadequate funding to tribal communities, inadequate resources, services, and protection for victims, jurisdictional barriers, stigma in reporting violence, and social and economic inequalities disproportionately impacting Native communities (eg unemployment, substance abuse).[11,22] There is scant research on the experiences of interpersonal violence among Native college students and thus, it is unclear how stalking victimization experiences and risk factors contributing to elevated rates may differ in college and university settings.

In the multivariate analysis, we found that Latino/a students had lower odds for stalking victimization exposure than non-Hispanic students. To our knowledge, no prior studies have examined the prevalence and nature of stalking victimization among Latinx college students. Scholars have previously described the importance of ethnicity, immigration status, and level of acculturation in understanding experiences of violence and help seeking in Latinx communities.[23] Therefore, lower rates of stalking victimization among Latinx students in this study sample may be related to students' ethnic identity, immigration and student status (international versus noninternational), and their level of acculturation, in addition to other individual, family, and community-level protective factors,[23,24] however, further research is needed to better understand factors associated with stalking victimization among Latinx college students, including ethnic diversity among Latinx students.

Finally, our study found disparate rates of stalking victimization among sexual minority and transgender and gender non-conforming students at the both the bivariate and multivariate levels of analysis. This finding is consistent with a previous study identifying higher rates and risk for stalking victimization among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) college students compared to heterosexual students at a large university in the South Atlantic.[25] Limitations to prior research on LGBTQ college students include small sample sizes that prevent the disaggregation between sexual and gender minority students, however, a strength of this study includes the ability to separately assess stalking victimization between sexual minority and transgender and gender nonconforming students and provides needed data for colleges and universities on victimization risks faced by this population of students. Factors contributing to higher rates among these student populations are not entirely clear. Future research is needed to better understand the unique contexts of stalking victimization within populations of sexual and gender minority students and the extent to which these victimizations occur within intimate and romantic partnerships or may intersect with other forms of harassment or hate crimes faced by these student populations.

Limitations

Findings should be considered within the context of several limitations. Data collected were self-report and are consequently suceptible to recall and reporter bias. Data were collected from eight universities within one Southwest university system and thus, findings may not be generalizable to other college students. Additionally, the low survey response completion rate (14%) and missing data on the stalking measures may lead to response rate bias and impact the generalizability of findings. Despite these limitations, the low survey response rate is a methodological challenge faced by many similar studies and prevalence findings are generally consistent with stalking victimization rates documented in the general population, including among subpopulations of women, American Indian/Alaska Native individuals, and sexual and gender minority individuals.[1,11,15] Limitations to the study's measure of stalking should also be considered. The stalking measure included only one item assessing victimization through technology and social media, and thus, additional dimensions of stalking behaviors through social media were not assessed, which may be particularly salient for student populations. Additionally, varying rates of stalking among student subgroups, including lower rates found among Latinx students, may be attributed to the stalking measure's validity and reliability in diverse student samples.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest concerning rates of stalking victimization since entering college, particularly among Native students, college women, sexual minority students, and transgender and gender non-conforming students. These data present important implications for college health and highlight the need for college campuses to include stalking-specific prevention strategies in existing policies and programs aimed at preventing violence among college students. Training and education on definitions and behaviors that constitute stalking is needed for college and university administrators, including the negative impacts stalking victimization may have on students' mental health, physical health, and academic achievement. Health and mental health services on college campuses should be cognizant of disparities in stalking victimization exposure among students and as such, understand its potential for differentially impacting various student populations. Still, the mechanisms leading to disproportionate rates of stalking among minority students are not entirely clear and thus, future research is needed to better understand how contexts of stalking victimization vary across diverse student populations, including risk and protective factors for stalking victimization among populations examined in this study (ie Native, Latinx, female sexual minority, and transgender/non-conforming students), which can then be used to guide tailored intervention approaches. Additionally, stalking victimization may coincide with other forms of interpersonal and dating violence (eg, sexual assault, physical violence, psychological abuse) and thus, future research is needed to understand the dynamic nature of victimization and how stalking may exacerbate experiences with other forms of violence across diverse student populations. Finally, this study also highlights the need for valid, reliable, and culturally relevant measures of stalking experiences that assess a range of stalking victimization experiences, including stalking through technology and social media platforms. Further research should include testing of stalking measures in larger samples of diverse student populations (e.g., racial and ethnic minority, sexual and gender minority, international students).

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report. The authors confirm that the research presented in this article met the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements, of the United States and received approval from the University of Texas, Austin.

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