

Stalking in the Age of Technology

A Call to Action for National Stalking Awareness Month

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Imagine that you are a young wife—estranged from your husband. A court has ordered him to stay away from you, but he shows up everywhere you go. You see him while driving on the road, in the parking lot at work, at a nearby table in restaurants, and at your friends' homes. Although you haven't spoken to him in months, he always knows exactly where you are.

Last year, the Seattle police received such a report from Sherri Peak, 36, whose estranged husband Robert seemed to know her every move. Detectives believed that Robert Peak was stalking his wife, and they brought Sherri's car into the city shop to scan for tracking devices. After several hours of futile searching, one officer popped off the dashboard cover and spotted a global positioning system (GPS) and a cell phone embedded in the car. Then police checked the victim's home computer and found spyware that allowed her husband to hack into her e-mail. Sherri Peak was indeed being stalked—via technology.

The Peak case illustrates a disturbing criminal trend and the dark side of technology. The devices we use to surf the Internet, e-mail one another, download music, and find our way in unfamiliar towns have also equipped stalkers with powerful tools. While "conventional" stalkers follow a victim from home to work or place countless phone calls to their homes, technology-empowered stalkers use GPS to track victims and computer programs to trace every Web site victims visit and every e-mail they send or receive. Stalkers can harass or threaten their victims (or urge others to do so) via e-mail or Web sites set up to harm the victim.

The potential impact of these tactics is staggering. National statistics show that 1 in 12 women and 1 in 45 men will be stalked during their lifetime. The average duration of stalking is two years, and more often than not it is accompanied by physical violence. In one study, 3 of 4 women murdered by their intimate partners had been stalked by that partner before they were killed.

Although all 50 states and the federal government have stalking laws, many were drafted before the widespread use of e-mail, the Internet, chat rooms, Web sites, social networking sites, GPS, cell phones, and tiny hand-held video and digital cameras. Last year Congress tightened the federal stalking law to take into account these potential stalking tools and techniques. Although some states are following suit, state legislators must continually assess the power of their stalking laws to prohibit and appropriately punish acts of stalking with current or even future technology.

January is National Stalking Awareness Month – the perfect opportunity for parents, lawmakers and community leaders to carefully review state and local laws on stalking and insist that laws keep pace with technology and protect our families. Through vigilance, both citizens and officials can combat stalking via technology. Just as parents and teens are

starting to learn how to protect their privacy while on-line, we can all learn how to detect high-tech stalking and what to do if it occurs.

For more information, visit or call the Stalking Resource Center, www.ncvc.org/src, 202-467-8700, or the National Crime Victim Helpline, 1-800-FYI-CALL.