

Running head: STALKING VICTIMIZATION IN PORTUGAL

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Stalking Victimization in Portugal:
Prevalence, Characteristics, and Impact

Abstract

Although the prevalence and associated features of stalking are well known in some countries, in many others, including Portugal, the experiences of stalking victims have remained unexplored until recently. This study aimed to identify the prevalence, characteristics, and impact of stalking victimization within a Portuguese population. A national community sample ($N = 1210$) took part in face-to-face interviews based on the Stalking Victimization Inventory. Lifetime prevalence of stalking was 19.5% and point prevalence was 11%. Victims were mainly targeted by acquaintances and former intimate partners. The most commonly experienced stalking behaviors were trying to establish contact, appearing in places where the victim was likely to be, and following the victim. Although stalking victimization disturbed both psychological health and lifestyle activity, 59.3% of the victims did not seek support. Results demonstrate that stalking victimization significantly affects the Portuguese population; consequently, it should be socially and legally recognized.

Keywords: Persistent harassment; victims; community; national study; self-defined

Stalking Victimization in Portugal: Lifetime Prevalence, Characteristics, and Impact

Many studies on stalking have been conducted since the late 1990s (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). However, as stressed by Dressing, Kuehner, and Gass (2005), community-based studies of prevalence rates for stalking and its impact on victims in European countries are scarce. Currently, as far as we know, such studies have been conducted in Austria (Freidl, Neuberger, Schönberger, & Raml, 2011; Stieger, Burger, & Schild, 2008), Germany (Dressing et al., 2005; Hellmann, & Kliem, 2015), Italy (ISTAT, 2007), the Netherlands (van der Aa & Kunst, 2009), Scotland (Morris, Anderson, & Murray, 2002), Sweden (Dovelius, Öberg, & Holmberg, 2006), and the United Kingdom (Budd & Mattinson, 2000; Walby & Allen, 2004; Walker, Flatley, Kershaw, & Moon, 2009). Other European countries, such as Belgium, do not have data on the prevalence of the phenomenon within community samples, despite having anti-stalking laws in place along with information such as rates of complaints made under the relevant legislation. However, a study performed within the 28 member states of European Union (EU) concluded that 18% of 42,000 women had experienced stalking since age of 15, and 5% had experienced stalking in the 12 months preceding the survey interview (FRA, 2014).

As argued by Grangeia and Matos (2011), these studies of community samples have not only contributed to a deeper understanding of stalking, but also helped define it as both a criminal issue and a significant public health problem. This has happened in Portugal, which recently changed the *status quo* regarding stalking (Ferreira, Matos, & Antunes, 2017). Currently, stalking is recognized in Portugal within scientific, social and legal arenas, but this was not the case even 10 years ago. Based on the 2007 report of the Modena Group on Stalking, a multidisciplinary European research group, Portugal was one of the 11 countries of the European Union where stalking was part of scientific discourse. For instance, the first Portuguese scientific work about stalking was published in 2007 – a theoretical article by Coelho and Gonçalves, entitled “Stalking: Another dimension of marital violence” (*Stalking: Uma outra dimensão da violência conjugal*). However, the Modena Group’s (2007) report did not identify Portugal as having a specific word for stalking, noted that Portugal did not have anti-stalking legislation, and noted no Portuguese prevalence studies. Despite the report

referring to the presence of Portuguese support agencies for victims, the available responses were with respect to general victimization.

This was our starting point when, in 2010, we developed a research project (funded by the Portuguese Government through Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) and Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género (CIG), grant number PIHM/VG/0090/2008), to explore the extent, nature, and characteristics of stalking victimization within the Portuguese population. It represented an effort to increase not only scientific knowledge, but also social and legal awareness, recognizing the fact that Portugal was, at that time, still far from enforcing an anti-stalking law. This was the starting point of the study presented here, the impact of which was, and remains, quite significant (Ferreira, et al., 2017). Based on international literature and also on our experience from both empirical research and applied victimology, we expected that stalking victimization in Portugal would be similar in nature to stalking in other countries.

However, potential cultural differences were also anticipated. Briefly, Portugal is located in the Southwest of Europe and has been a member of the European Union since 1986. According to the latest Census (INE, 2011), Portugal has 10,562,178 inhabitants, almost 48% being male, an illiteracy rate of 5.2%, and 13.2% of the population have higher education. Although Portugal was the first country to abolish slavery, interpersonal relationships (and, consequently, violent phenomena) are still influenced by traditional paradigms (e.g., patriarchal society, victim blaming). In sum, when we began this study, Portugal had no specific word covering the meaning of stalking – we considered “persistent harassment” (*assédio persistente*) as the best translation. Also, legislation did not deal with all stalking scenarios and did not protect all victims, and social recognition of stalking was not yet achieved. Nevertheless, there was also good news: A growing body of knowledge and empirical evidence was emerging, and professionals who dealt with stalking victims were claiming and achieving specific resources and responses. Additionally, media attention on stalking was growing, promoting public awareness. Therefore, it was timely to gather empirical data to understand stalking victimization in Portugal.

Our study had four main purposes, namely, to identify the prevalence of stalking victimization within a Portuguese population, to understand the nature and the dynamics involved, to analyze the impact and associated fear and, finally, to characterize how victims sought support. Due to the pioneering and exploratory nature of this study, no assumptions or hypotheses were previously established; instead, some open questions guided our research, namely: What is the prevalence of stalking victimization in Portugal? Who are the victims and who are the stalkers? What kind of prior relationship did they have? Which stalking behaviors commonly occur? How frequently are stalking behaviors conducted and what is the duration of stalking? Which life domains are disturbed? How frightened are the victims? Do the victims seek support? If so, who from and how useful was it?

Method

Definition of stalking

There is no consensual definition of stalking, which varies across countries, and even within the same country, it varies across domains. Indeed, in some cases, the legal and scientific definitions do not overlap (Meloy, 2007). Even among researchers, this remains a controversial topic that results in different scientific definitions and measures of stalking (Sheridan, Blaauw, & Davis, 2003). In this study, stalking was defined as a *behavioral pattern of persistent harassment, which includes different kinds of communication, contact, surveillance, and monitoring of a target by another person – the stalker* (Grangeia & Matos, 2010). These *unwanted communications and contacts may disturb the victim's life*, sometimes severely. Initially, we presented the above definition of persistent harassment to participants, followed by a screening question – “*A person demonstrates his/her interest and attention to a target, in a continuous but unwanted manner. Did it happen to you at some point of your life?*” Participants who answered “yes” to this question were considered victims of stalking.

Participants

The general sample of the Portuguese population included 1210 participants with a mean age of 44.25 years ($SD = 16$, age range: 16–94 years) and 52.9% were females. Portuguese nationality was reported by 96.6% of the participants; other nationalities represented

3.4% of the participants, most being Brazilians (1.8%). A majority of the participants were married or cohabiting (52.6%), one-third were single (33.4%), 7.3% were divorced and 6.7% were widowed. Concerning education level, 45.5% had attended compulsory education and only 2.4% had not attended school. In addition, one in five participants had a higher education degree. More than 70% of the participants were employed; others were retired (11.5%), were students (10.8%) or were unemployed (4.0%). Finally, 75.9% of the sample lived in an urban area.

Instrument

The “Stalking Victimization Inventory” (SVI; Matos, Grangeia, Ferreira, & Azevedo, 2009) was developed to assess stalking victimization and associated features. The inventory included 23 items, organized in five sections, namely, sociodemographic characteristics, occurrence of stalking victimization, behaviors and dynamics, impact, and sources of support.

The SVI is intended to identify victims of stalking through a brief definition of persistent harassment, followed by a screening question – “*A person demonstrates interest and attention to a target, in a continuous but unwanted manner. Did it happen to you at some point of your life?*” Participants who answered “yes” to this question were considered victims and were asked for further information about their experiences regarding stalking behaviors, dynamics, impact, and activated support. Accordingly, stalking victims were identified by self-definition and not by external criteria, such as fear or specific duration (e.g., > 2 weeks).

In the dynamics section, we gathered data regarding the number and sex of stalker(s), prior stalker/victim relationship (if it was an intimate relationship, we asked whether the stalking happened: before, during, and/or after the relationship), stalking occurrence at that time, stalking behaviors (including 10 common actions and an option “other behaviors”), frequency, and duration.

The impact associated with stalking victimization was assessed by two sets of questions. First, the victims were asked how the experience interfered with their professional or academic performance, physical health, psychological health, relationships with others, intimate relationships, economics/finances, and lifestyle (forceful behavioral changes). Responses ranged

from 0 (“*Not at all*”) to 4 (“*Very much*”). Second, we asked how they felt about the experience, and three answers were available: “*not frightened at all; a little frightened; very frightened.*”

The final section of SVI inquired about support; more specifically, whether participants asked for any kind of help. When a positive response was obtained, we asked about the support sources activated (“*family members; friends; acquaintances; people from professional context; health professionals; police; social workers or agencies for victims support; other*”) and their usefulness.

SVI is a brief self-report measure that can be administered either as an interview or a pen-and-pencil instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was preceded by two parallel tasks, namely, sample definition and interviewer training. Portuguese inhabitants of both sexes who were aged 16 years or older, were defined as targets. To correspond to the distribution of the Portuguese population, the participants were pre-stratified by region, age group (16–18 years, 19–29 years, 30–64 years, and ≥ 65 years), and gender, according to the data of Census 2001¹ provided by Statistics Portugal². Individuals who could not fluently speak or understood Portuguese, who exhibited any cognitive deficit, or who were suspected of drug or alcohol misuse, were excluded. Based on these criteria, we proceeded to a random selection of participants included in the sample.

¹ In Portugal, Census data, the most rigorous and complete source of national sociodemographic information, is collected every 10 years. Our reference to stratification was Census 2001, since data from Census 2011 was not yet available.

² Although full randomization of the participants was the stronger methodological option, currently, at least in Portugal, it is not feasible. In the past this could be done using telephone directories, but they no longer exist. The only alternative would be the electoral rolls, access to which is usually denied by the Portuguese Data Authority. Consequently, in order to assess a range of individuals from the community, we gathered data in main streets.

To guarantee that participants understood the focus of the study, data were collected through face-to-face interviews, conducted all over the country between April and June 2010. In an initial phase, the interviewers were trained not only to administrate the SVI, but also to cope with critical incidents. Interviews were performed in central streets or other public places, where individuals were invited to participate in the study ($n = 1792$). First, the purposes and ethical standards were explained, and the SVI was administered to those who agreed to participate ($n = 1210$); all questions were administered only in the Portuguese language. Demographic data and screening questions were posed to all participants; information about behaviors, dynamics, impact, and support was only gathered if the person defined himself/herself as a victim of stalking. At the end, an informative leaflet was available for all the participants.

After collection, the data were analyzed through the software *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS; version 22.0 for Windows). Descriptive analyses were performed on all variables; wherever relevant, bivariate inferential statistical tests were also conducted to explore the correlations and differences between the groups.

Results

Prevalence

As shown in Table 1, 19.5% of the participants reported being a victim of stalking at some point during their lifetime. The majority of these victims specified that the experience occurred in the past (89%), in most cases more than 12 months previously than the previous year (71.2%). However, one in ten admitted to being a current victim of stalking (11%).

Women self-defined as victims of stalking almost twice as often than men (25% vs. 13.3%). Nevertheless, only lifetime prevalence reached a significant association between gender and victimization, $\chi^2(1) = 26.14, p < .001, \phi = .147$.

The analysis of prevalence by age group revealed that young men and young women (16-29 years) reported the highest lifetime victimization (26.7%), followed by the 30-64 age group (20.3%), while older adults (65 years or more) demonstrated the lowest (7.8%). There was a significant association between the oldest group and the other two age groups in relation

to lifetime victimization, $\chi^2(2) = 30.05, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .158$; but not at the present, $\chi^2(2) = 0.60, p = .74$, Cramer's $V = .05$.

Characteristics

First, the participants were asked about the number of stalking episodes they had experienced, and the majority (59.7%) reported a single case. In spite of this, the number of stalkers identified by victims ranged from 1 to 20 ($M = 3.44, SD = 2.54$). There were significant differences between men and women, $t(224) = -2.86, p = .005, d = 0.36$; more specifically, a higher number of stalkers were reported by male participants ($M = 2.46; SD = 2.82$ vs. $M = 1.67; SD = 1.32$). Although stalkers were mainly men (68% vs. 28.1%), there was a significant association between the gender of the stalker and that of the victim, $\chi^2(2) = 123.626, p < .001, \phi = .73$, i.e., females were victimized mostly by males and vice versa.

Concerning the prior relationship between the stalker and the victim, 71.9% of the participants presented the stalker as someone acquainted; particularly, ex- or current intimate partners represented 31.7%, and relatives, friends, colleagues, or neighbors represented 40.2%. Almost about one in four admitted to having been stalked by a stranger (24.8%).

A comparison of male and female victims showed that both were mostly stalked by a relative, friend, colleague, or neighbor (51.3% vs. 34.8%, respectively); however, there were differences regarding other relationships. Male victims were more often victimized by ex-partners (38.2%); it is also notable that other categories had less significant frequencies. On the other hand, about one in three women presented the stalker as a stranger and one in four women presented the stalker as an intimate partner (see Table 2).

Experience of the stalking behaviors listed in the survey ranged from 1 to 10 ($M = 3.6, SD = 2.21$) and there was no evidence of differences based on victim gender, $t(234) = -0.46, p = .65, d = .06$. Overall, the most prevalent stalking behaviors involved trying to establish contact (79.2%), appearing in places where the victim was likely to be (58.2%), following (44.5%), and spying (37.4%). Considering the victim's gender, males and females shared the first and second

most frequent behaviors (trying to establish contact: 82.9% vs. 77.5%; appearing in places where the victim was likely to be: 63.2% vs. 56.3%, respectively), but not the third: Women were more likely to be followed (48.1%), whilst men were more likely to be spied upon (40.8%; see Table 2). To be filmed photographed without consent was the least acknowledged stalking behavior for victims (4.2%). The analysis of threats to victims or third parties exhibited another trend. Irrespective of gender, about one in four victims reported this stalking behavior.

Aggression was also a feature of stalking experiences in this sample. Specifically, aggression or damage to third parties was described by 13.1% of the victims and the frequency was noted to be similar across genders (female victims: 13.8%; male victims: 11.8%). Moreover, 7.2% of the victims reported the occurrence of physical or/and sexual violence towards themselves, and women were twice as often attacked than men (8.8% vs. 3.9%, respectively).

Stalking behaviours were experienced mostly on a daily or weekly basis (41.9% for each category). Only one in ten participants stated the frequency of stalking activity as less than once a month (10.2%). For most of the men who were stalked, it occurred weekly (50%), while more female victims reported being harassed daily (45%). Regarding the duration, the majority of victims reported that the stalking lasted from two to six months (53.6%), and in 15.3% of cases, it lasted more than two years. On the other hand, in general, a minority of victims reported that stalking lasted less than two weeks (overall: 11.5%; females: 12.6%; males: 9.2%). When comparing victim genders, although there were apparent differences in the distribution of the ranks – e.g., more than 2 years: 13.8% females vs. 18.4% males – statistical tests did not achieve significance, $Z = -1.28$, $p = .20$.

Impact

According to the results presented in Table 3, the principal domains that were disturbed were psychological health (36.6%), lifestyle/behavioral changes (25.4%), and intimate relationships (23.4%). The victims identified economy/finances and professional/academic performance as the least affected domains (10.3% and 15.7%, respectively).

On analyzing female and male victims, a similar pattern of reporting about the impact of stalking was observed. Nevertheless, there were statistically significant differences concerning

psychological health, $Z = -3.7$, $p < .001$; as well as lifestyle and behavioral changes, $Z = -2.72$, $p = .007$, with women reporting higher impacts. Similarly, there was also a marginal significant difference in physical health between genders, $Z = -1.69$, $p = .09$.

The total number of impaired domains ranged from zero to seven ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 3.31$) and there were no differences between genders, $t(234) = 1.44$, $p = .15$, $d = .19$. Interestingly, only 12.7% of the victims said that stalking victimization did not interfere with any of the life domains examined.

When fear was analyzed, 68.2% of the victims reported being “a little or very frightened” concerning the stalking campaign. Half of the male victims said they had not felt any fear, while 76.9% of the female victims reported that they had been frightened (both a little and very frightened). These differences between men and women achieved statistical significance, $Z = -4.61$, $p < .00$. Reporting of fear seemed to be related to the number of total stalking behaviors experienced, $t(234) = -5.5$, $p < .001$, $d = .81$, gender of the stalker, $Z = -4.72$, $p < .001$, and frequency of the stalking behaviours, $H(3) = 8.84$, $p = .012$. Specifically, fear was mostly indicated by victims who suffered a higher number of stalking behaviors, who were stalked by a man, and whose stalking experiences were more frequent. There were no fear differences relating to the prior relationship between stalker and victim, $Z = -0.38$, $p = .71$, as well as the duration of stalking, $H(5) = 3.23$, $p = .67$.

Support

A majority of the victims (59.3%) did not seek any kind of help to deal with being stalked. When we compared men and women, we found a statistical association between gender and support seeking, $\chi^2(1) = 11.419$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .22$, in that female victims asked for help more often than male victims (48.1% vs. 25%, respectively). Furthermore, a mean of 2.39 sources of support ($SD = 1.50$, range: from 1 to 8) were sought by victims and there were no differences regarding gender, $t(234) = -0.28$, $p = .78$, $d = .07$.

According to Table 4, friends (66.7%) and family members (64.6%) were the most frequent sources of support. In contrast, social workers or victim support agencies (3.1%) were the least sought sources of support. Just over one in four victims sought police support (26%),

while help from health professionals were sought by one in five participants (21.9%). Although the main source of help differed between female and male victims, namely, friends (68.8% vs. 57.9%) and family members (68.4% vs. 63.6%), respectively, there was no association between gender and sources of help sought - family members, $\chi^2(1) = .15, p = .69, \phi = .04$; friends, $\chi^2(1) = 0.82, p = .37, \phi = .09$; acquaintances, $\chi^2(1) = 0.31, p = .58, \phi = .06$; people from professional contexts, $\chi^2(1) = 0.49, p = .48, \phi = .07$; health professionals, $\chi^2(1) = 0.27, p = .6, \phi = .05$; police, $\chi^2(1) = 0.001, p = .98, \phi = .003$; social workers or agencies for victim support, $\chi^2(1) = 0.36, p = .55, \phi = .06$.

In general, more than 68% of the victims rated the sources of support as useful. The only exception was the category, “social workers or agencies for victim support,” which had been sought by a restricted number of victims (3.1%) and was evaluated by all as unhelpful. For female victims, help provided by people from professional contexts (95.2%) was the most useful, while men considered family members and friends as the most useful (both 100%). Surprisingly, on comparing the rates of female and male victims regarding the usefulness of police support, we observed a differential trend: While the majority of women evaluated it as useful (75%), only a minority of men perceived the same (40%).

Discussion

This study represents a pioneer effort: For the first time, the prevalence and associated features of stalking victimization in a Portuguese population have been analyzed. Until now, no national-based empirical data existed, and simply employing international results within a Portuguese context did not seem appropriate.

According to the meta-analysis conducted by Spitzberg and Cupach (2007), the average prevalence of stalking victimization in the general population is 18%. The results of the present study are similar: 19.5% of the participants were victims of stalking at some point during their lifetime. However, these values are higher than those observed in other countries. For example, the prevalence ranged from 9% in Sweden (Dovelius et al., 2006) to 15.1% in England and Wales (Walker et al., 2009). These discrepancies may be due to idiosyncrasies in definitions of

stalking and criteria for victimization, as pointed out by Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison (2000) and Sheridan et al. (2003). To illustrate this, Purcell, Pathé, and Mullen (2002) analyzed lifetime prevalence according to three criteria: the presence of two or more intrusive behaviors that caused fear (23.4%), the presence of two or more intrusive behaviors that caused fear and lasted for more than two weeks (12.8%), and the presence of 10 or more intrusive behaviors that caused fear and lasted for more than four weeks (10.6%). Based on these results, it can be concluded that higher prevalence rates are achieved when broader criteria are applied. This was observed in the present study, where the victims were self-defined via a single screening question. In this study, women and young people seem to represent the most vulnerable groups, and these trends have also been reported by other researchers (e.g., Budd & Mattinson, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). It is worth noting that differences only exist in relation to lifetime prevalence rates, perhaps due to memory effects. When we compared the number of stalkers in the present sample with similar findings from other works, the majority of the victims reported only one stalker – e.g., 59.7% in the present Portuguese sample and 62.1% in a United States of America sample (Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009). Among Portuguese victims, men reported more stalkers than did women. However, comparable data is not available from other community studies and, therefore, we cannot conclude whether this is a common or a specific feature. Nevertheless, these results are both interesting and challenging: Women reported a higher prevalence, but men reported being victim of more stalkers. Stalker gender is an uncontroversial outcome: As in other studies, our work found that in the majority of cases, the stalker was a man. In a more detailed analysis, combining genders of the victim and the stalker, a heterosexual pattern was observed: Females were found to be mainly victimized by males and vice versa; these values are not significantly different from those reported by Budd and Mattinson (2000). In contrast, the results presented by Baum et al. (2009) did not follow this pattern.

Concerning stalker and victim relationship, some distinguishable characteristics were noted. The most reported relationship category was acquaintances, while intimate and ex intimate partner stalkers were reported by almost one-third of the victims. These results are

similar to those provided by Baum et al. (2009), but not to those presented by Morris et al. (2002), who concluded that stalking occurred mainly between intimate partners (48%). Despite this apparent difference, as we did not evaluate the motivations involved in individual stalking experiences, we cannot guarantee that none of the acquaintances stalked for intimate reasons. Additionally, contrary to the common-sense misperceptions stranger stalkers were reported only by 24.8% of victims.

The most frequent stalking behaviors were trying to establish contact, appearing in places where the victim was likely to be, and following. The same pattern was noted by Stieger et al. (2008), despite these authors presenting a greater average number of stalking behaviors (namely, 5 vs. 3.6 in the Portuguese sample). In the present sample, threats occurred in 26.3% of cases and physical violence or/and sexual violence was reported by 7.2% of the victims; these values are lower than those obtained by Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) meta-analysis with respect to general sample (M for threats=40; M for physical violence= 34; M for sexual violence= 15). This may be explained by a proportion of the studies analyzed by Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) being based on clinical and forensic samples. The frequency and duration of stalking experiences is quite comparable between the present study and other earlier studies (e.g., Dressing et al., 2005): stalking most often tends to occur in a daily or weekly basis and last for several months, even years.

Portuguese stalking victims described psychological health, lifestyle/behavioral changes, and intimate relationships as the most affected domains. In contrast, economy/finances and professional/academic performance were evaluated as the least disturbed. Despite the difficulty of comparing these values with those provided by other authors, owing to discrepancies in the measures adopted, the results seem to be generally similar; for instance, in the UK based study by Budd and Mattinson (2000), 92% of the victims admitted to feeling upset or irritated and 71% changed their lifestyle. When compared with North American victims (Baum et al., 2009), the economic impact was found to be less in Portugal, and this difference may be explained through cultural specificities: Traditionally, in Portugal, the purchasing of security systems and services as well as changing jobs are not very common; hence, economic

costs tend to be minimized. Fear caused by the stalking campaign is not an easy variable to compare. Indeed, some studies established fear as one criterion for victimization (e.g., Dressing et al., 2005; Purcell et al., 2002). We disagree with that conception, which excludes victims who evaluate their experience as disturbing, but not as fearful. In the present study, 68.2% of the victims felt a little or very frightened and women reported more fear than men, similar to the trend observed by Davis, Coker, and Sanderson (2002). According to the US Department of Health and Human Services (2000), 75% of victims described the experience as something dangerous or threatening to life. Moreover, Baum et al. (2009) further analyzed fear and concluded that victims are mainly afraid of the unpredictability of the campaign (46.1%), followed by physical damage (30.4%), and the fear that the stalker would never stop (29.1%). Indeed, in a recent study about stalking perceptions, Uhl, Rhyner, Terrance, and Plumm (2017) concluded that people usually rated vignettes as stalking when the interaction involved fear and explicit threat.

Regarding the seeking of support, in Portugal, the majority of victims did not ask for any help, and help seekers were most often women. This trend to overlook help is similar to that observed in a Swedish population (75%; Dovelius et al., 2006) and very different from an Australian sample (Purcell et al., 2002), in which 69% of the victims sought some kind of help. In a country where stalking is not yet legally and socially recognized, as in Portugal, there may well be more barriers to seeking help (e.g. less recognition) and as such victims did not engage in this highly recommended coping strategy (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Spitzberg, 2002; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Victims mainly sought help from friends and family members, and one in four sought help from police. In contrast, only 3.1% of victims sought help from social workers and agencies for support. According to Baum et al. (2009), this is also true in the case of the North American population, although seeking the help of social workers and agencies for victim support was slightly higher. In the United Kingdom, Walby and Allen (2004) observed the same pattern, suggesting that stalking victims prefer informal support rather than formal help and that these results are quite understandable: If stalking victims ask for help from family members and friends, and if this effort is successful, then they will benefit from emotional and

instrumental support and improved safety. Additionally, a study by Lynch and Logan (2015) with police officers revealed that previous experience with charging stalking impacted on perceptions of dangerousness, reporting practices and perceived barriers to charging. Concerning the usefulness of sources of support, in most of the Portuguese cases, the evaluation was positive, except for help from social workers or agencies for victim support. In the international context, this question remains under investigation and the data available mainly focus on legal and judicial responses (e.g., Dovelius et al., 2006); owing to the absence of an anti-stalking law and any specific resources for stalking victims in Portugal, it is not feasible to reflect about this dimension. However, we can point out one observation: A majority of women evaluated police support as useful, but for most of the men, it was perceived as unhelpful; once again, gender differences could be observed. Thus, important questions rise: What are the aims of female and male victims who seek police help? What are the police responses? Are they the same or do they vary according to the victim's gender? These questions should be addressed.

In 2012, Matos, Grangeia, Ferreira, and Azevedo claimed that “at the present time, we can say that scientific attention was the first step to establishing stalking as a prevalent social problem (...), with significant consequences at the individual, community and social level, requesting thereby multidisciplinary attention. We believe that soon stalking will be established as a police and criminal phenomenon, since it is now in the judicial agenda.” (p.193). Currently, stalking is recognized socially and, since 2015, legally (Ferreira, et al., 2017). This study and this evolution can be encouraging to other countries, where stalking remains invisible and unaccountable. Indeed, at the national level, this research acted as a turning point: Arguments that stalking only exists in soap operas and films, and that victimization is innocuous to victims and third parties, were defeated. Additionally, it was clear that many victims remained isolated and did not seek any kind of help. Taking action – i.e., organizing legal and social recognition and responses - was the subsequent step.

This study has some limitations. First, the results only apply to community samples and cannot be generalized to other specific samples; in this sense, further studies should be conducted to analyze population specificities. We measured stalking victimization based on an

inclusive and broad perspective; this option may increase the prevalence rates achieved and therefore, comparisons should be made cautiously; in future, it will be interesting to analyze different criteria for stalking and explore how these impact the results. After considering the pros and cons of several methods of data collection, we selected face-to-face interviews in streets across the country. Although we consider that a personal approach is the best way to assess potential sensitive topics, we are also aware that some people might feel suspicious, threatened, or intruded upon, especially the stalking victims. To more deeply understand the influence of the data collection method on the results of a study of stalking victimization, a comparative approach should be designed.

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Table 1

Prevalence Rates of Stalking Victimization as a Percentage

Temporal reference	By gender			By age group		
	Overall	Female	Male	16–29	30–64	≥ 65
	(<i>N</i> = 1210)	(<i>n</i> = 640)	(<i>n</i> = 570)	years	years	years
Lifetime	19.5	25	13.3	26.7	20.3	7.8
Current	11	11.3	10.5	11.3	11.6	2.0
Past	89	88.8	89.5	88.8	88.4	94.4
Last 12 months ^a	28.8	31.7	23	39.0	27.0	13.3
More than 12 months ago ^a	71.2	68.3	77	61.0	73.0	86.7

Note. Prevalence by gender and age groups.

^a Only 184 responses were available

Table 2

Characterization of the Stalking Victimization as a Percentage

Variable	Groups		
	Overall (<i>n</i> = 236)	Females (<i>n</i> = 160)	Males (<i>n</i> = 76)
Gender of stalker^a			
Male	68	91	20
Female	28.1	5.8	74.7
Unknown	3.9	3.2	5.3
Victim/stalker relationship^b			
Current partners	2.6	3.8	0
Ex-partners	29.1	24.7	38.2
Relative, friends, colleagues, or neighbors	40.2	34.8	51.3
Met on Internet	0.9	0.6	1.3
Strangers	24.8	32.9	7.9
Other	2.6	3.2	1.3
Stalking behaviors			
Following	44.5	48.1	36.8
Try to establish contact	79.2	77.5	82.9
Threats to victims or third parties	26.3	26.9	25
Film or take pictures without consent	4.2	1.9	9.2
Comb, steal or seize personal things	18.2	16.9	21.1
Invading property or using force to enter home	16.1	13.8	21.1
Appearing in places the victim is likely to be	58.5	56.3	63.2
Threaten to hurt him/herself	16.9	16.9	17.1
Spying or ask someone else to spy	37.3	35.6	40.8
Physical and/or sexual aggression towards the victim	7.2	8.8	3.9
Variable	Groups		

	Overall	Females	Males
	(<i>n</i> = 236)	(<i>n</i> = 160)	(<i>n</i> = 76)
Stalking behaviors	13.1	13.8	11.8
Aggression or damage to third parties			
Frequency			
Daily	41.9	45	35.5
Weekly	41.9	38.1	50
Monthly	5.9	6.3	5.3
Less than once a month	10.2	10.6	9.2
Duration			
Less than 2 weeks	11.5	12.6	9.2
Between 2 weeks and a month	21.7	22.0	21.1
Between a month and 6 months	31.9	33.3	28.9
Between 6 months and 12 months	9.8	10.1	9.2
Between 1 and 2 years	9.8	8.2	13.2
More than 2 years	15.3	13.8	18.4

Note.

^a231 responses available

^b234 responses available

Table 3

Impact of Stalking in Life Domains and in Fear as a Percentage

Variable	Groups		
	Overall (<i>n</i> = 236)	Females (<i>n</i> = 160)	Males (<i>n</i> = 76)
Professional/academic performance			
Not at all	57	54.1	63.2
Almost nothing	12.3	10.7	15.8
A little	14.9	18.9	6.6
Fair	8.9	8.8	9.2
Very much	6.8	7.5	5.3
Physical health			
Not at all	56.8	54.1	62.7
Almost nothing	10.7	9.4	13.3
A little	15.4	16.4	13.3
Much	11.5	13.2	8.0
Very much	5.6	6.9	2.7
Psychological health			
Not at all	31.5	24.5	46.1
Almost nothing	6.4	5.7	7.9
A little	25.5	26.4	23.7
Fair	21.3	25.2	13.2
Very much	15.3	18.2	9.2
Relationships with others			
Not at all	51.3	50.3	53.3
Almost nothing	12.0	11.3	13.3
A little	18.8	18.2	20.0
Fair	11.5	13.2	8.0

Variable	Groups		
	Overall (<i>n</i> = 236)	Females (<i>n</i> = 160)	Males (<i>n</i> = 76)
Relationships with others			
Very much	6.4	6.9	5.3
Intimate relationships			
Not at all	49.8	52.8	43.4
Almost nothing	9.8	6.3	17.1
A little	17.0	17.6	15.8
Fair	14.0	14.5	13.2
Very much	9.4	8.8	10.5
Economics/finances			
Not at all	77.7	77.2	78.7
Almost nothing	8.6	8.2	9.3
A little	3.4	5.1	0
Fair	4.3	3.8	5.3
Very much	6.0	5.7	6.7
Lifestyle/behavioral changes			
Not at all	45.2	40.6	54.8
Almost nothing	10.1	7.1	16.4
A little	19.3	22.6	12.3
Fair	17.1	19.4	12.3
Very much	8.3	10.3	4.1
Fear			
Not frightened at all	31.8	23.1	50.0
A little frightened	43.2	45.0	39.5
Very frightened	25.0	31.9	10.5

Table 4

Sources of Support Sought by Victims and their Usefulness as a Percentage

Variable	Groups		
	Overall (<i>n</i> = 96)	Females (<i>n</i> = 77)	Males (<i>n</i> = 19)
Sources of support			
Family members	64.6	63.6	68.4
Friends	66.7	68.8	57.9
Acquaintances	14.6	15.6	10.5
People from professional contexts	30.2	28.6	36.8
Health professionals	21.9	20.8	26.3
Police	26	26	26.3
Social workers or agencies for victim support	3.1	2.6	5.3
Usefulness of the sources of support			
Family members	95.1	93.8	100
Friends	87.1	84.3	100
Acquaintances	85.7	91.7	50.0
People from professional contexts	92.9	95.2	85.7
Health professionals	81	81.3	80
Police	68	75	40
Social workers or agencies for victim support	0	0	0