

Op-Ed: Enhancing Community Accountability for Stalking September 17, 2015

Makeala Zabel-Gravvatt, a Boise resident, was recently shot in the backyard of her home by Christopher Wirfs, who had been stalking her over the last few months. This particular incident calls attention to the overlooked and underreported crime of stalking and highlights the critical program and policy changes needed to enhance the safety of individuals who experience stalking.

Stalking is a form of gender violence, like abuse and rape, disproportionately impacting girls and women and people who are gender oppressed. While legal definitions of stalking vary, stalking can be understood as a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. Each year, 7.5 million people are stalked in the United States, a majority by someone they know. Women are three times more likely to be stalked than men.

Stalking is an overlooked and underreported crime. We need a deeper understating about the course of conduct that occurs in stalking crimes—unwanted phone calls, texts, voicemails and emails. The stalker may show up at home, work, school or other places the individual who is the target of the stalking frequents. The stalker may also monitor actions through the use of technology. This results in the individual being stalked feeling that there is no safe space.

Stalking is difficult to prove unless we view the actions in the entirety of context. When we fail to establish the pattern of behavior necessary to establish a crime, we place the safety of the person being stalked in jeopardy. Stalking is a unique crime; people are often relied upon to document the actions of the stalker, but not told what specific information is necessary to provide.

In the last decade, we have seen an increase in the use of technology to stalk. Stalkers place spyware on computers or phones, monitor actions through GPS, or use social media to contact and harass the person who is being stalked. Responders who are not familiar with this technology may believe that the individual who is reporting the stalking is paranoid or lying, when in actuality the stalker is engaging in a dangerous course of conduct.

Individuals being stalked are often instructed to stop using technology, which only increases isolation and is not a viable solution.

Stalking, like many issues regarding gender violence against girls and women and people who are gender oppressed, is often looked at as an individual anomaly. As a community, we must take a deeper look at the root causes of stalking and other gender violence issues. We must analyze the multiple intersecting oppressions that many girls and women and people who are gender oppressed face: sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia and develop real solutions that address the entirety of lived experiences.

Solutions include listening and validating someone's experience. Anyone who is being stalked should be provided with incident and behavior logs that can assist in documenting the stalking. Advocates or victim witness coordinators will listen, support and provide resources. Most importantly, we must demand that the Idaho Legislature establish a civil order of protection for stalking. Currently, civil protection orders are only available to individuals experiencing domestic or dating violence and must be related by blood or marriage or have a current or former relationship with the person who is engaging in stalking or abusive. The Idaho Legislature needs to add stalking to the civil protection statute, so that individuals experiencing stalking, regardless of their relationship to the stalker, are afforded protection. As a society, we need to enhance safety for anyone who is being stalked and hold people who engage in stalking behaviors accountable.

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