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**An Investigation of Stalking in Intimate Partner Violence Cases in Aotearoa New
Zealand**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree:

Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
at
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by
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Abstract

Partner stalking is often assumed to be a dangerous problem that is distinct from intimate partner violence (IPV) overall, or from other types of IPV (e.g., physical, sexual, and psychological violence). Such assumptions imply that partner stalking requires identification, assessment, and response processes distinct from other types of harm within both intact and separated intimate relationships. However, considerable confusion—about how best to (a) define partner stalking and (b) distinguish partner stalking from other harm types—seems to persist among researchers and practitioners alike. Accordingly, this thesis contains three empirical studies that investigate these assumptions (and the corresponding confusion) by focusing on partner stalking definitions and identification, as well as partner stalking-related risk prediction. The first study examined police-recorded partner stalking in episode reports across 1,150 IPV cases. Few police officers explicitly used the label ‘stalking’, but we found evidence of partner stalking within one in every seven IPV cases reported to New Zealand Police. The second study was a qualitative analysis of practice-based definitions of partner stalking, based on interviews with 14 specialist IPV practitioners. Rather than providing a summary definition of partner stalking, practitioners defined partner stalking as a list of behaviours. There was also considerable heterogeneity in whether—and, if so, how—practitioners distinguished partner stalking from other types of IPV harm. Finally, the third study examined whether partner stalking predicted subsequent IPV outcomes reported to police across a 12-month follow up in 1,126 cases. Partner stalking was a weak predictor of any IPV recurrence (in univariate analysis only) and did not predict physical IPV recurrence (in univariate or multivariate analyses). Taken together, and broadly mirroring the previous research literature, the findings in this thesis suggest that police and specialist IPV practitioners lack a shared understanding of partner stalking; in turn, hindering their ability to clearly define and identify this phenomenon, especially in relation to other types of IPV. And

within this current practice context, partner stalking may not warrant special consideration for risk prediction, given that (with one exception) partner stalking did not predict subsequent IPV outcomes reported to police. Overall, these findings challenge assumptions that partner stalking—at least based on current research- and practice-based conceptualisations of the construct—is meaningfully understood as a distinct concern from other types of harm within abusive relationships. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this conclusion, while considering recommendations for ongoing research and theory development.

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List of Publications

Peer-reviewed Journal Articles

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2023). Hiding in plain sight: Identifying partner stalking in intimate partner violence episodes reported to New Zealand Police. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–22.
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Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Heterogeneity in practitioners' definitions of partner stalking in intimate partner violence cases. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Partner stalking as a possible risk factor for subsequent intimate partner violence reported to New Zealand Police. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Conference Presentations

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2023, December). Identifying stalking in IPV episodes reported to New Zealand Police. Paper presented at Aggression and the Mind Conference, Wellington, New Zealand.

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2023, October). Identifying stalking in IPV episodes reported to New Zealand Police. Paper presented at Waikato Waitaha Forensic Psychology Conference, online.

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2022, October). Identifying stalking in IPV episodes reported to New Zealand Police. Paper presented at Exceptional Policing: The Evidence Based Way Conference, online.

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2022, September). Identifying stalking in IPV episodes reported to New Zealand Police. Paper presented at New Zealand Psychological Society Annual Conference, Auckland, New Zealand.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Picture this scenario: the police attended an intimate partner violence (IPV) episode that involved ex-partners “Abi” and “Ben”. Ben had unexpectedly showed up at Abi’s house (despite the fact she had recently moved and had tried to keep the new address secret from him due to fears for her safety) and was denied entry into the home. He was aggressive, banged on the door and questioned why she never responds to any of his texts. Abi told the attending officers that Ben had contacted her multiple times each week since their separation three months ago and shared concerns that he had hacked into emails. However, the resulting police episode report did not explicitly mention stalking. Abi apparently did not self-identify as a stalking victim and the officers did not use this term to describe Ben’s pattern of behaviour. This case example, which is based on an amalgam of similar cases from police data, provides an important starting point for this thesis, prompting us¹ to question and explore how researchers and different types of practitioners define and understand partner stalking within IPV cases.

At the outset of this thesis, we briefly note some key language choices. Terms such as perpetrator or offender imply criminal offending, but behaviours of interest in this research may not always meet a criminal threshold. And the term stalker risks depersonalising an individual who exhibits such behaviour. So, instead, we use the term aggressor to refer to any individual predominantly perpetrating abusive behaviours within a relationship. Similarly, opinions differ on the most appropriate way of referring to victims. While acknowledging that some people prefer the term victim-survivor, we use the term victim for simplicity.

¹ Words like we, our, and us reflect the involvement of my supervisors in this research, and wider support from a postgraduate lab.

Defining IPV and Partner Stalking

IPV is an extremely pervasive and harmful issue. Across a range of countries (e.g., New Zealand, Canada, India, South Africa, the United States), approximately one in three women will experience IPV at some point in their lives (Yakubovich et al., 2018). And preliminary estimates suggest that at least 50% of IPV victims will also experience partner stalking (McEwan, Shea et al., 2017). Accordingly, partner stalking in cases of IPV represents an important social problem for researchers and practitioners alike to consider.

Focusing on IPV first, this phenomenon is commonly defined as any instance of physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, or (partner) stalking that is perpetrated against a current or former intimate partner (Breidling et al., 2014). Similarly, New Zealand legislation currently defines IPV as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse that is perpetrated against a current or former partner; with psychological abuse specifically covering property damage, harm to animals, threats, coercive control, financial abuse, intimidation, and harassment² (Family Violence Act, 2018). Given these IPV definitions explicitly include references to partner stalking, and cover current or former partners, we position partner stalking as (a) a type of IPV that (b) may occur across any intimate relationship phase, at least when initially framing this thesis.

Across the general (i.e., rather than IPV) literature, stalking is commonly defined as an aggressor's intentional pattern of *repeated, unwanted behaviours* towards a victim over time, which may cause the victim to feel fearful, threatened, or otherwise negatively impacted (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; McEwan et al., 2021). In this general context, the term stalking covers aggressors and victims who are strangers, acquaintances, friends, family members, neighbours, colleagues, or people who—at some point—have been in an intimate relationship

² This act defined harassment as the aggressor (a) watching, loitering, or hindering access to the victim's home, workplace, or other such place that the victim often frequents, (b) following the victim (and, at times, forcing some sort of interaction), or (c) trespassing on the victim's land or buildings.

(i.e., partner stalking). Compared to these former types of aggressor-victim relationship, partner stalking is more common (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), and these aggressors are more likely to have a criminal history and use more varied, frequent, persistent, and violent stalking behaviours (Björklund et al., 2010; Douglas & Dutton, 2001; Mohandie et al., 2006; Mullen et al., 2006; Palarea et al., 1999; Sheridan & Davies, 2001; Thomas et al., 2008; White et al., 2020).

As noted above, stalking represents a multidimensional term with four key definitional criteria. First, the behavioural criterion specifies the types of behaviour that are included under the umbrella term of stalking. Such behaviours vary across stalking measures (e.g., Coleman, 1997; McEwan et al., 2020; Turmanis & Brown, 2006), with an early meta-analysis collating over 400 differently worded tactics (Spitzberg, 2002). However, typical stalking behaviours include the aggressor following the victim; sneaking into, showing up, or waiting at places they should not be (e.g., the victim's home or work); giving the victim unwanted items (e.g., letters, presents); harassing third parties (e.g., the victim's friends or family); making unwanted calls or texts to the victim; tracking the victim's whereabouts (e.g., via GPS); posting or threatening to post information about the victim online; sending unwanted messages using the Internet (e.g., via email or social media); and monitoring the victim's social media (Truman & Morgan, 2021).

Second, the repeated criterion requires a recurring pattern of behaviours over time (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Researchers commonly operationalise this definitional component as two or more instances of stalking behaviour, or simply code stalking behaviour as 'repeated' or 'persistent' without providing any further details to indicate how many instances of stalking behaviour are required (Fox et al., 2010). Occasionally, researchers specify additional requirements for this criterion (Fox et al., 2010), such as a minimum of five incidents (e.g. McEwan et al., 2020) or a duration of two weeks or more (e.g. Purcell et

al., 2004). A minimum duration may prevent some of the minor and normative stalking-like behaviours that often follow a breakup (e.g., Stenswick, 2002) from meeting the threshold for stalking (Senkans et al., 2021).

Third, the unwanted criterion requires a stalking victim to experience the pattern of behaviour as explicitly unwelcomed (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Researchers commonly reference this component in their definitions of stalking (Fox et al., 2010). But the rules for operationalising this component remain poorly described; researchers appear to rely on (a) overall inferences without specifying the exact criteria or (b) the wording of some items within stalking measurement tools (e.g., ‘unwanted’ telephone contact). This component may be challenging for researchers to accurately measure when using archival data or self-reported aggressor data, because the victim’s perspective cannot be directly assessed.

Fourth, the victim impact criterion requires a victim to explicitly express fearfulness about—or experience some type of negative impact as a result of—the aggressor’s behaviour; or, alternatively, that a ‘reasonable person’ (e.g., a jury member) in the same situation would feel fearful or threatened (McEwan et al., 2021; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Application of a specific victim fear standard is common (Fox et al., 2010) but may result in conservative prevalence estimates for stalking (e.g., Owens, 2016), given factors such as the victim’s gender, age or ethnicity, the aggressor-victim relationship type, specific victimisation experiences, and the timing of the fear assessment may influence fear expression (e.g., Dietz & Martin, 2007; Owens, 2017; Reyns & Englebrecht, 2013). And other negative emotions like helplessness, anger, or anxiety can result from stalking victimisation (Englebrecht & Reyns, 2011), so requiring victims to exclusively demonstrate or report fearfulness may be too prescriptive and restrictive (Dietz & Martin, 2007; Fissel et al., 2022). Instead, researchers should assess whether victims experience meaningful disruption to their lives, or reductions in wellbeing as a result of their stalking experiences (Brady & Reyns, 2020;

McEwan et al., 2021). And, as with the unwanted criterion, this component may also be challenging to accurately measure when using archival data or self-reported aggressor data.

Together, the definitional criteria used for stalking vary considerably across the literature. Although many researchers emphasise behaviours when defining and operationalising stalking, the specific behavioural items included in stalking measures vary widely (Spitzburg, 2002). Meta-analytic findings highlight that researchers most frequently require the unwanted criterion to define stalking, followed next by the repeated criterion and, least frequently, the victim fear criterion (Fox et al., 2010). As such, synthesizing findings from across the research literature is a difficult task due to the heterogeneity in how stalking is defined and measured.

The Relationship Between IPV and Partner Stalking

Over and above this lack of definitional clarity, broader complexities exist in how researchers conceptualise the relationship between partner stalking and—depending on one’s perspective—IPV overall, or other types of IPV. Despite the IPV definition provided above, which presents partner stalking as a type of IPV or psychological abuse, the research literature is divided on this issue. We argue that two major sources of confusion exist, based on researchers’ perceptions of the relevance of (a) the aggressor’s and victim’s relationship phase and (b) specific behaviours perpetrated by the aggressor.

Accordingly, some researchers define IPV as a phenomenon that occurs within intact relationships and partner stalking as a phenomenon that occurs within separated relationships (e.g. Ferreira & Matos, 2013; McEwan, Shea et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). In turn, these researchers conceptualise partner stalking and IPV as related, but distinct, phenomena. This approach primarily uses the relationship phase of aggressors and victims to distinguish partner stalking from IPV overall. This approach is grounded in the general stalking literature (i.e., inclusive of all types of stalking, rather than just partner stalking).

Other researchers define partner stalking as a phenomenon that occurs across all relationship phases (i.e., intact and separated relationships) and conceptualise it as a type of IPV (e.g. Basile & Hall, 2011; Breiding et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2022; Mechanic et al., 2000; Walker et al., 2006). Here, researchers distinguish partner stalking based on specific types of behaviour perpetrated by the aggressor, irrespective of whether such behaviour occurred during an intact or separated relationship phase. This approach is primarily grounded in the IPV literature and so only considers partner stalking within the context of IPV cases, as we will do throughout this thesis unless otherwise explicitly specified.

Similar differences in ideological positions are mirrored when considering possible distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control. Coercive control refers to an ongoing dynamic that is established and maintained by an aggressor over many or all facets of their victim's life (Stark, 2007). Using intimidating, isolating and controlling tactics, the aggressor hinders the victim's physical safety and their overall autonomy (e.g., access to resources, social connectedness; Stark, 2007). However, again, researchers typically position partner stalking as either conceptually distinct from coercive control (e.g., Davis et al., 2000; Katz & Rich, 2015; Ornstein & Rickne, 2013) or as a type of coercive control (e.g., Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Hilton et al., 2022; Stark, 2007; Tutty et al., 2023). Thus, overall, the terms researchers use to label IPV- and partner stalking-related constructs vary considerably across the literature. As noted in sexual violence research, but still highly applicable here, often (a) the same terms are defined differently—as demonstrated above with stalking either representing a distinct construct from, or a type of, IPV—and (b) different terms are defined similarly (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015). Regarding the latter, we argue that labels such as partner stalking, harassment, persistent pursuit, obsessive relational intrusion, and coercive control either have highly overlapping definitions or lack clear explanations regarding the distinctions between them. These labelling issues further hinder knowledge synthesis in this

area, as it often remains unclear the extent to which phenomena labelled as ‘stalking’ (and related terms) represent the same construct across individual studies.

The Practice Context for Partner Stalking in IPV Cases

With this background in mind, we now turn to how partner stalking is defined and operationalised in practice, focusing on criminal justice and social service settings.

Legal Frameworks for Partner Stalking

Legislation may support practitioners’ understandings of, and responses to, partner stalking (Thorburn & Jury, 2019). But legal frameworks vary across jurisdictions, regarding both the presence and specific nature of (general and partner) stalking laws (e.g., McEwan et al., 2007). Such variation highlights the complexities in criminalising this phenomenon; at least in part because, unlike most other crime types, stalking cannot be determined from one incident alone and many of the behaviours that contribute to stalking (especially partner stalking) are difficult to evidence and often benign in non-abusive contexts (Bouffard et al., 2021; McEwan et al., 2007). New Zealand stalking legislation is atypical compared to other OECD countries (e.g., Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States), because several acts (Harassment Act, 1997; Harmful Digital Communications Act, 2015; Family Violence Act, 2018) partially cover different types of stalking overall. However, only the Family Violence Act (2018) criminalises partner stalking; and recall that this act covers limited types of partner stalking behaviours under ‘harassment’. As such, New Zealand partner stalking legislation contradicts the definitional criteria set by most researchers.

Police Practice Regarding Partner Stalking

In turn, legislation may impact the nature of policing IPV cases that involve partner stalking. Police are an important consideration here, due to their multifaceted role as gatekeepers to the criminal justice system (MacKenzie & James, 2011; Robinson et al., 2016), first responders that assess and mitigate the risk of ongoing IPV (McEwan, Bateson et

al., 2017; New Zealand Police, n.d.), and facilitators of an important referral pathway through to coordinated community services (New Zealand Police, n.d.; Mossman et al., 2017).

Specifically, police in all jurisdictions can issue informal warnings to IPV aggressors who perpetrate partner stalking, support partner stalking victims to apply for non-contact orders (e.g., Trespass Orders, Protection Orders), and potentially arrest and charge these aggressors for related crimes; but only police in jurisdictions with established partner stalking legislation can formally classify episodes as, and arrest or charge aggressors for, partner stalking (Storey & Hart, 2011).

However, legislation may not be as powerful or effective in shaping police responses as one might assume. Even in jurisdictions with established partner stalking legislation, police rarely explicitly identify partner stalking in IPV episode reports (Garza et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2009; HMIC, 2017; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and often miscategorise partner stalking episodes as involving related, but lower tariff, offence types (e.g., harassment, threatening behaviour, breach of a non-contact order; Brady & Nobles, 2017; HMIC, 2017; Jordan et al., 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Woodroof, 2010). Further, police rarely arrest or lay charges in IPV cases with partner stalking (Brady & Nobles, 2017; Brady et al., 2020; Garza et al., 2020; HMIC, 2017; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Woodroof, 2010). Possible explanations for such practice include police (a) having a limited understanding of local partner stalking-related legislation (HMIC, 2017; Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2021; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), (b) finding it difficult to gather sufficient evidence for a pattern-based—rather than incident level—crime (Brady & Nobles, 2017; Brady et al., 2020; Garza et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), (c) holding contradictory perceptions around the seriousness of partner stalking (Garza et al., 2020; Sheridan et al., 2016), or (d) finding it difficult to meet the victim fear threshold required in some jurisdictions (Brady & Nobles, 2017; Brady et al., 2020). As such, consistent criminal justice

responses do not appear to automatically result from partner stalking-related legislation (Bouffard et al., 2021; Brady & Nobles, 2017), so the limited partner stalking legislation currently in place in New Zealand may not be as impactful as it first appears, at least from a policing and research perspective.

The operational context for New Zealand Police (NZP) also differs somewhat from police in other jurisdictions internationally. As noted earlier, the Family Violence Act (2018) dictates that NZP respond to a much wider range of IPV behaviours than just physical or sexual violence. In fact, many IPV calls for service comprise exclusively of verbal harm, with no evidence of criminal offending observed by NZP (Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021; Tomkins, Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2023). Rather than prioritising prosecution, holistic harm prevention in IPV cases represents a primary strategic focus for NZP; and responding to IPV (and non-IPV family violence) is the main demand on NZP's frontline resources (New Zealand Police, n.d., 2022). As such, the New Zealand definition of IPV and the nature of police involvement in IPV episodes differs from many other jurisdictions and research contexts and provides a broad foundation from which to explore issues related to partner stalking.

Wider Practice Regarding Partner Stalking

Across different countries, IPV practice guidelines strongly emphasise partner stalking: calling it a high-risk factor and implying the need for identification, assessment, and response processes that are distinct from other types of IPV (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). Although minimal research has examined whether (non-police) practitioners' understanding of partner stalking aligns with this emphasis, initial findings suggest that contradictory practice-based definitions and knowledge of partner stalking may exist (Logan et al., 2006; Villacampa & Salat, 2019). Further, practitioners' perceptions about the possible distinctions between partner stalking and other types of IPV also seem heterogenous: some practitioners position partner stalking as a

distinct type of IPV (Thorburn & Jury, 2019), whereas others position partner stalking “under the long list of behaviours within the category of ‘power and control’—that general ‘catch-all’ term we use to talk about the ways abusers dominate their victims” (Dreke et al., 2020, p. 769). However, additional research is required to better understand practice-based definitions of partner stalking, and whether practitioners distinguish between partner stalking and other types of IPV, especially within a specialist IPV practice context.

Additional complexities remain evident in victim responses to partner stalking, at least when focusing on self-identification and labelling. Even if victims meet the (research or legal) definitional criteria for partner stalking, many will not self-identify partner stalking or label themselves as a stalking victim (Englebrecht & Reynolds, 2011; Jordan et al., 2007; McNamara & Marsil, 2012; Ménard & Cox, 2016). Accordingly, victims may be unlikely to tell police or specialist IPV practitioners that “I’m being stalked” and so the clinical competence required to identify and respond to this phenomenon may be higher than for other IPV harm types.

The Current Thesis

Taken together, major definitional ambiguities persist in the literature, with these issues potentially mirrored by ongoing difficulties in operationalising partner stalking across different IPV practice contexts. While this thesis alone cannot overcome such confusion, our primary aim is to better understand the heterogeneity in stalking definitions, as an initial but important step towards developing a more coherent shared understanding of partner stalking in IPV cases among researchers and practitioners alike. Further, a considerable proportion of the general stalking research has drawn samples from psychiatric (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2008; McEwan, Daffern, et al., 2017), community (e.g., De Smet et al., 2015; Hayes & Kopp, 2023) or university settings (e.g., Björklund et al., 2010; Dardis & Gidycz, 2019); or used self-reported data exclusively from aggressors (e.g., Norris et al., 2011; Wheatley et al.,

2021) or victims (e.g., Logan et al., 2007; Melton, 2007a). Instead, we focus on police and specialist IPV providers, and partner stalking at the case level, to provide insights that will be directly relevant to IPV-specific practice.

Accordingly, this first chapter has provided background knowledge relevant to the mixed-methods research conducted as part of this thesis. We present three empirical studies across chapters two to four; all of which are published in, or under review by, peer-reviewed academic journals. Chapter two contains the quantitative study ‘Hiding in plain sight: Identifying partner stalking in intimate partner violence episodes reported to New Zealand Police’ (henceforth labelled study one). This study examines stalking in cases of IPV reported to NZP and provides foundational evidence about partner stalking prevalence rates and issues related to defining and identifying partner stalking. Chapter three contains the qualitative study ‘Heterogeneity in practitioners’ definitions of partner stalking in intimate partner violence cases’ (henceforth labelled study two). To build on study one’s findings about identifying and defining partner stalking, this study explores practice-based definitions of partner stalking within a specialist IPV practice context. Chapter four contains the quantitative paper ‘Partner stalking as a possible risk factor for subsequent intimate partner violence reported to New Zealand Police’ (henceforth labelled study three). Given the heterogeneity in practitioners’ definitions in studies one and two, and the potentially correspondingly unreliable nature of partner stalking as a variable for predicting the risk of ongoing IPV, this study examined partner stalking from a risk prediction perspective. And finally, in chapter five, we summarise the key findings from across this programme of research, present the overarching theoretical and practical implications, and consider some further limitations and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Study One

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2023). Hiding in plain sight: Identifying partner stalking in intimate partner violence episodes reported to New Zealand Police. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–22.
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Abstract

In relationships characterised by current or previous intimate partner violence (IPV), partner stalking is a commonly occurring phenomenon. In this study, we examined police-recorded partner stalking in IPV episode reports across 1150 cases to (a) consider the overlap between IPV and partner stalking, and the relevance of the aggressor and victim's relationship phase to defining partner stalking; and (b) contribute empirical evidence about partner stalking prevalence rates and identification rates by police and victims. A secondary aim involved exploring possible differences between IPV cases with and without partner stalking. Although few police or victims explicitly used the label 'stalking', we identified evidence of partner stalking within one in every seven IPV cases reported to New Zealand Police. Further, this study contributed novel analysis about relationship dynamics by adding an on-off relationship phase to the typically dichotomised categories of intact and separated relationships. In turn, we identified partner stalking relatively rarely within intact relationships; and significantly more frequently, and at similar rates, across both the separated and on-off relationship phases. Finally, we discuss implications for defining the overlap between IPV and partner stalking, police practice, and future research.

Key words: domestic violence; partner abuse; stalking acknowledgement; harassment; unwanted pursuit behaviours

Partner stalking is an all-too-common experience (Breiding et al., 2014; Thorburn & Jury, 2019). When combined with previous or current intimate partner violence (IPV) between the aggressor and victim, the effects may be more harmful and dangerous overall than victimisation only by IPV or partner stalking (Ferreira & Matos, 2013; Logan et al., 2007; Logan & Walker, 2010; Spencer & Stith, 2020). But the conceptual overlap between IPV and partner stalking remains unclear (Douglas & Dutton, 2001; Flowers et al., 2020; Logan & Walker, 2009; McEwan et al., 2017) and further research is needed on IPV and partner stalking within a police practice context (Backes et al., 2020; Dreke et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019). Therefore, the current study examines partner stalking between aggressors and victims with at least one IPV episode reported to police, to (a) consider the overlap between partner stalking and IPV, and the relevance of the aggressor's and victim's relationship phase to defining partner stalking; and (b) contribute empirical evidence about partner stalking prevalence rates and identification rates by police and victims. A secondary aim involves exploring possible differences between IPV cases with and without partner stalking.

Defining Stalking

Stalking—whether of strangers, acquaintances, or intimates—refers to an aggressor's intentional pattern of repeated, unwanted stalking behaviour³ towards a victim over time, that may cause the victim fear (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). In other words, this definition contains three key components. The *repeated component* refers to a recurring pattern of behaviours (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). However, the operationalisation of this component varies, with most studies either stating the behaviour was repeated without specifying further details or requiring a minimum of two incidents involving stalking behaviour (Fox et al.,

³ Types of stalking behaviour include the aggressor following the victim, showing up at the victim's home uninvited, making unwanted phone contact, posting inappropriate information about the victim online, monitoring the victim via tracking devices, and so on (Truman & Morgan, 2021).

2010). Few studies apply strict requirements (Fox et al., 2010), such as a minimum of five incidents (e.g. McEwan et al., 2020) or a minimum duration of two weeks (e.g. Purcell et al., 2004). The *unwanted component* refers to these behaviours being experienced as unwelcome by the victim (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Finally, the victim fear component, henceforth labelled the *fear standard* (Dietz & Martin, 2007), requires that the victim explicitly expresses fearfulness or that a reasonable person in the same situation would feel fearful (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). But the measurement of these three components—and, correspondingly, of stalking overall—remains inconsistent across individual studies (see Fox et al., 2010). In particular, several concerns relate to the fear standard. Evidence suggests that requiring the fear standard underestimates stalking prevalence rates (e.g. Owens, 2016). Factors such as the victim's gender, ethnicity, the victim-aggressor relationship, the specific victimisation experiences, and the timing of fear assessment may influence fear expression or relate to under-detection by third parties (Dietz & Martin, 2007; Owens, 2017; Reynolds & Englebrecht, 2013; Sheridan et al., 2014). And many emotions other than fear, such as anxiety, helplessness or anger, can result from stalking victimisation (e.g. Englebrecht & Reynolds, 2011). So, arguably, requiring victims to demonstrate only one type of emotion (i.e. fear) is overly prescriptive and restrictive (Dietz & Martin, 2007; Fissel et al., 2022). Finally, fear-related information may not have been systematically recorded; making research using archival records unable to meet this standard.

Defining Partner Stalking and the Conceptual Overlap with IPV

Additional complexities are specific to partner stalking. Partner stalking occurs between people who (at some point) have been in an intimate relationship. However, the literature appears divided on (a) the relevance of the aggressor's and victim's *relationship phase* (i.e. an intact versus separated relationship) at the time of stalking for this definition and (b) the nature of the overlap between IPV and partner stalking. We consider two main

approaches to conceptualising, defining, and measuring the overlap between IPV and partner stalking. In some studies, IPV and partner stalking are conceptualised as related—but distinct—phenomena (e.g. Ferreira & Matos, 2013; McEwan et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). This approach appears grounded in the general stalking literature. In this way of thinking, partner stalking occurs between people who are not in a current relationship. So, although these researchers note that IPV during the relationship and partner stalking post-relationship may be characterised by similar behaviours (Ferreira & Matos, 2013; McEwan et al., 2017), whether the couple is currently ‘together’ distinguishes IPV from stalking. Here, researchers define a pattern of abusive behaviours *during the relationship* as IPV and *following the relationship* as stalking (Senkans et al., 2021). The relationship phase between the aggressor and victim is thus a highly important criterion for defining partner stalking in this approach.

In other research, partner stalking has been defined as a subtype of IPV (e.g. Basile & Hall, 2011; Breiding et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2022; Logan & Walker, 2010; Mechanic et al., 2000). This approach is grounded in the IPV literature and views partner stalking as just another component of abuse, alongside physical, sexual, and psychological violence (Breiding et al., 2014). Here, distinctions between partner stalking and other forms of IPV are based on the pattern of behaviours, regardless of whether they occur while the couple’s relationship is ongoing, or post-separation. Behaviours labelled as partner stalking primarily focus on surveillance and unwanted contact (e.g. Truman & Morgan, 2021), whereas behaviours labelled as other forms of IPV focus on physical violence; sexual violence; or tactics relating to intimidation, minimisation, victim-blaming, isolation, and financial abuse under the umbrella of psychological violence (e.g. Lehman et al., 2012). Thus, the relationship phase between the aggressor and victim is not part of the criteria for defining partner stalking in this approach.

But regardless of the definitional perspective used, another issue relates to defining exactly what phase the victim and aggressor's relationship is in when partner stalking occurs. Relationship instability (i.e. on–off relationships, Dailey et al., 2009; relationship churning, Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Halpern-Meekin & Turney, 2021; or relationship cycling, Monk et al., 2018) represents a dynamic relationship phase. Henceforth labelled *on–off relationships*, this term refers to any couple who breaks up and reconciles at least once (Dailey et al., 2009). Despite the high prevalence of on–off relationships in the general population (Dailey, 2019) and the high average number of on–off phases experienced by IPV aggressors and victims (Logan et al., 2008), this phenomenon has received relatively little attention across the partner stalking, IPV and wider relationship-related research literature. Instead, most researchers adopt a binary view and dichotomise relationship phase categories as intact or separated only (Dailey et al., 2009)—in turn, making an on–off relationship invisible for many couples. For partner stalking research, this dichotomisation represents a potential source of inaccuracy; comparisons of partner stalking rates across different relationship phases may be contaminated by researchers labelling some couples' current relationship phase simply as intact or separated when, in fact, they are cycling in and out of the relationship.

Partner Stalking in Cases of IPV Reported to Police

Notwithstanding these issues in defining and measuring partner stalking, we now synthesise the most relevant empirical evidence relating to (a) the prevalence and identification rates of partner stalking in cases of IPV and (b) any differences between IPV cases with and without partner stalking. Here, IPV cases refer to relationships with physical, psychological or sexual violence, irrespective of the aggressor's and victim's relationship phase classification.

Prevalence Rates

One review estimated that 50% of IPV victims experienced partner stalking by the same aggressor, based on data self-reported from victims or aggressors in forensic, community or student samples (McEwan et al., 2017). However, using police data and the methods outlined in Table 1, partner stalking was identified in 16.5% (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), 19.3% (Garza et al., 2020) and 27.9% (Melton, 2012) of IPV cases reported to police. Given the methodological differences, the latter prevalence rates are understandably lower than in McEwan and colleagues' (2017) review; but these figures suggest police episode reports for IPV still commonly include statements that indicate the presence of partner stalking.

Police- and Victim-Identified Partner Stalking

Of note, these figures hide the observation that—despite including statements that indicate the presence of partner stalking—police rarely identify and explicitly label a pattern of partner stalking. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) found police-identified partner stalking in one in every 14 IPV cases that researchers later determined met the United States National Institute of Justice's definition for stalking. Other studies also demonstrated low rates; police identified partner stalking in 6.8% (Klein et al., 2009) and 40.9% (Brady et al., 2020) of researcher-identified partner stalking cases. Overall, these findings suggest that police may 'grossly under-identify stalking cases from among domestic violence cases' (Klein et al., 2009, p. 40).

Similar patterns are evident for victims' self-identification of partner stalking. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) demonstrated that, despite articulating experiences that constituted partner stalking, victims (were recorded by police as having) labelled their experiences as stalking in only one in every 20 researcher-identified partner stalking cases. Klein and colleagues (2009) found similarly low rates. The general literature on (all types of) stalking

shows this same common disconnect between victims describing experiences that meet the criteria for stalking but not self-identifying as a stalking victim (e.g. Englebrecht & Reynolds, 2011; McNamara & Marsil, 2012; Ménard & Cox, 2016).

Difference Between IPV Cases With and Without Partner Stalking

Several other differences are evident between the recorded characteristics of IPV cases with and without partner stalking. Threats of harm (Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012), a separated relationship status (Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), and the victim self-reporting the episode to police (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) were *more* likely in IPV cases with partner stalking than without. Further, the availability of evidence (e.g. aggressor at scene, electronic or physical evidence; Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012), substance use (Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), co-occurring physical violence (Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), victim injury (Garza et al., 2020; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the presence of a witness during the episode (Garza et al., 2020), the victim and aggressor sharing children (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and victim fear (Melton, 2012) were *less* likely in IPV cases with partner stalking than without.

Policing Partner Stalking and Partner Stalking Legislation

Research using police data must be understood in the context of the policies and legislation of the jurisdictions in which the research is conducted. For example, in some jurisdictions, all types of stalking (i.e. partner, stranger, acquaintance) are a crime—enabling arrest, prosecution and sentencing of IPV aggressors that stalk their victims (e.g. Bouffard et al., 2021; Brady et al., 2020; Brady & Nobles, 2017; Garza et al., 2020). In other jurisdictions, partner stalking may not be criminalised; and instead covered by civil orders, such as in New Zealand (Thorburn & Jury, 2019). Partner stalking—as one type of psychologically abusive behaviour—can then form part of the grounds for granting a civil Protection Order, the breaching of which is a criminal offence (Family Violence Act, 2018).

Table 1. *Overview of Key Studies' Methods*

	Garza et al. (2020)	Melton (2012)	Tjaden and Thoennes (2000)
Data source and sample	Police IPV case files; $N = 332$ from the United States	Police IPV episode reports: one episode examined per case; $N = 1440$ from the United States	Police IPV episode reports: one episode examined per case; $N = 1785$ from the United States
Stalking behavioural items	Nine items from Fisher et al. (2000, 2002): Telephone; Waited outside or inside places; Watched from afar; Followed; Sent letters; Emailed; Sent gifts; Showed up uninvited; 'Other' stalking behaviour	Coleman's (1997) Stalking Behavior Checklist: Broke into home, car; Stole, read mail; Came unwanted; Threatened, harmed new partner; Unwanted calls; Unwanted messages; Unwanted email; Unwanted gifts; Checked up on; Followed, watched; 'Other' stalking behaviour	The 'antistalking code for states developed by the National Criminal Justice Association for the National Institute of Justice' (p. 430): Following; Face-to-face confrontations; Unwanted communications by phone, page, letter, fax, e-mail
Repeated component of stalking	Two or more different stalking behaviours OR one stalking behaviour must occur on two or more occasions	Not included	Same or different stalking behaviours, must occur on two or more occasions
Unwanted component of stalking	Required evidence of 'unwanted course of pursuit' (p. 1020) but no further details about operationalisation	Relied on wording for some behavioural items, e.g., unwanted telephone calls	Relied on wording for some behavioural items, e.g., unwanted communications
Fear standard for stalking	Not included	Not included	All cases coded with victim fear: 'it was assumed that persons who were identified as victims in a domestic violence crime report had experienced fear as a result of behaviors perpetrated against them by the suspect' (p. 428)

It may be assumed that jurisdictions that have criminalised partner stalking provide better sites for this research. However, evidence suggests that increasingly comprehensive stalking legislation has not yet translated into consistent recording of, or responses to, stalking in criminal justice settings (Bouffard et al., 2021; Brady & Nobles, 2017). Experts argue that ‘legislation alone does little to guide frontline officers and investigators in the proper handling of stalking investigations’ (Brady & Nobles, 2017, p. 3154) so local policies may be more important than the legislative context. In New Zealand, addressing IPV is one of New Zealand Police’s (NZP) most important strategic aims, alongside a shift away from prioritising prosecution to providing more holistic support (New Zealand Police, n.d., 2022). Much of what police respond to, and correspondingly record, falls outside of criminalised behaviour; NZP do not record criminal offences in the majority of reported IPV episodes (Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021; New Zealand Police, 2022). Regardless of whether offending is detected or charged, NZP still record extensive information about IPV episodes and respond in varied ways to prevent ongoing harm (New Zealand Police, n.d., 2022). With this practice context in mind, this study will explore information recorded about partner stalking in IPV episodes reported to NZP.

The Current Study

The current study aims to build on previous research in two main ways. First, inconsistencies persist over how to conceptualise the overlap between IPV and partner stalking, and the relevance of the aggressor’s and victim’s relationship phase to defining partner stalking. As such, we adopt an intentionally broad definition of partner stalking that covers stalking behaviours occurring in any relationship phase and enables us to examine prevalence rates across different relationship phase categories. Additionally, research largely overlooks the dynamics of on–off relationships when considering how to define and measure partner stalking. So, as per recommendations to comprehensively describe the nature of the

aggressor-victim relationship (McEwan et al., 2020), we seek to explore partner stalking across three categories that represent different relationship phases: namely, intact, on– off, and separated. Notwithstanding the limitation that involved parties, practitioners and researchers alike cannot know for certain whether a currently intact or separated couple may experience an on–off dynamic in the future (Dailey et al., 2009), we propose it is worthwhile attempting to account for this additional relationship phase. Such efforts may improve the accuracy of partner stalking prevalence estimates across different relationship phases, using whatever sufficiently detailed data is available to researchers. Second, only a small body of empirical research has sampled IPV cases reported to police to provide information about partner stalking prevalence rates and identification practices by police and victims, or differences between cases with and without partner stalking. Accordingly, this study will add to this modest evidence base. We posed the following main research questions (1–3) and a secondary research question (4):

1. How frequently is partner stalking⁴ evident in cases of IPV reported to NZP?
2. Focusing on the relationship phase between aggressors and victims, how frequently is evidence of partner stalking recorded across the intact, on–off, and separated relationship categories?
3. How frequently do police and victims explicitly identify and label partner stalking?
4. Are there any differences between IPV cases with and without partner stalking, across other recorded variables?

⁴ Our operational definition of partner stalking is similar to previous research (e.g., Garza et al., 2020; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and is detailed comprehensively in the method section.

Method

This study had ethical approval from the University of Waikato and was approved by the ISR national governance board.

Data Source

This study used a cross-sectional design based on archival data from NZP. Drawing from the national police database, a NZP employee compiled the initial dataset. This dataset contained information about 2259 unique aggressor and victim pairings with at least one IPV episode reported to NZP in the Waikato and Christchurch regions between 1 November and 31 December 2018 (although we do not assume that this episode was the first ever reported to NZP for each case). These two regions include urban and rural communities with varied socio-demographic profiles (Mossman et al., 2017).

The first author cleaned and organised the data. We removed a total of 67 cases where: the aggressor's or victim's details were unknown ($n = 12$), police misclassified other types of family violence as IPV ($n = 35$), aggressors or victims were aged under 16 years ($n = 9$), or episodes were 'locked for security reasons' ($n = 11$). From the remaining 2192 cases, we used SPSS (version 28) to randomly select a final sample of 1150 cases. Next, we examined any subsequent IPV episodes reported to NZP during the six-month study period for each case (i.e. ending between 1 May and 30 June 2019, depending on the first sampled episode date). We only retained episodes where police identified the aggressor and victim in the same roles as in the first sampled episode. Accordingly, we examined a total of 2168 individual episode reports across the 1150 cases. Most cases had one reported episode recorded (59.9%) during the study period, but this count ranged from 1 to 23 per case ($M = 1.9$ episodes).

Measures

NZP officers completed all episode reports used in this study. Our first data type, *police-coded variables*, was taken from answers coded by police, based on prompts with a series of pre-determined options. These variables included the aggressor's and victim's age, gender, and ethnicity; as well as episode location types (private dwelling or public place), the overall risk level assigned by police at the first sampled episode and, lastly, whether police dichotomously recorded the presence of verbal harm, physical harm, sexual harm, threats of harm, property damage, alcohol use, or drug use during the first sampled episode (i.e. present = 1, absent = 0).

For the second data type, *researcher-coded variables*, the first author coded variables from the free-text section of all sampled episode reports across the six-month study period. This section detailed information about the aggressor, victim, their relationship and family situation, witnesses, evidence, and what happened during the episode. We describe these variables below, which were mostly dichotomously recorded (i.e. present = 1, absent = 0).

Partner Stalking

To code partner stalking as present, we required evidence of the following:

1. At least one behavioural item from the United States National Crime Victimization Survey's Supplemental Victimization Survey on stalking; henceforth named NCVS/ SVS stalking behaviours (Truman & Morgan, 2021). These NCVS/SVS stalking behaviours include *Followed*: the aggressor followed the victim around and watched them; *Sneaked* (we named *Forced/covert entry*): the aggressor sneaked into the victim's home, car or other location and did unwanted things to indicate their presence; *Waited*: the aggressor waited at the victim's home, work, school or other location where they were unwelcome; *Showed up*: the aggressor showed up, rode or drove by

places where the victim was when they had no business being there; *Items* (we named *Inappropriate gifts*): the aggressor left or sent cards, letters, presents, flowers or any other unwanted items; *Third parties*: the aggressor harassed or repeatedly asked the victim's friends or family for information about the victim; *Telephone* (we named *Unwanted phone contact*): the aggressor made unwanted phone calls to the victim, left voice messages, sent text messages or used the phone excessively to contact them; *Spyware*: the aggressor spied on the victim or monitored their activities using technology (e.g. listening device, camera, computer/phone monitoring software); *Location tracking*: the aggressor tracked the victim's whereabouts with an electronic device or app (e.g. GPS); *Reputation damage*: the aggressor posted or threatened to post inappropriate information about the victim online (e.g. photographs, videos, rumours); *Other messages* (we named *Unwanted cyber contact*): the aggressor sent the victim unwanted online messages (e.g. via email, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook); or *Social media*: the aggressor monitored the victim's activities using social media apps.

2. Representing the repeated component, either (a) two types of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviours over one or more episodes (e.g. 'Followed' and 'Unwanted gifts') or (b) the same type of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviour across either two or more episodes or discrete dates within a single episode (e.g. 'Waited' today and two weeks ago).
3. Representing the unwanted component, at least one of the following co-occurred with an NCVS/SVS stalking behaviour: (a) the aggressor and victim were broken up; (b) an active court order (e.g. Protection Order, Trespass Order) prevented contact between the aggressor and victim, irrespective of the

current relationship phase; or (c) the victim reported the episode to police themselves, irrespective of the current relationship phase.

Partner Stalking with Fear Standard

To provide supplementary insights about operationalising partner stalking, we separately examined a modified version of the partner stalking measure above. In addition to the three points from our main partner stalking measure, we additionally required explicit evidence of recorded victim fear (see Other Variables below).

Relationship Phase

To categorise the relationship phase for each case, we used a combination of police-coded relationship status ('Violence Between Partners' or 'Violence Between Ex Partners') and researcher-coded variables (On–Off Relationship; whereby police described in-text that the aggressor and victim had an on-again/off-again relationship or had broken up and resumed the relationship at least once) during the study period. The term *intact* refers to cases where police consistently labelled sampled episodes as involving Partners, with no researcher-coded evidence of an on–off relationship or separation; *separated* refers to cases where police consistently labelled sampled episodes as involving Ex-partners, with no researcher-coded evidence of an on–off or intact relationship; and *on–off* refers to cases where police labelled sampled episodes as involving Partners and Ex-Partners at different times across the study period or there was researcher-coded evidence of an on–off relationship.

Simplified Relationship Phase

To provide supplementary insights about operationalising relationship phase, we separately examined a simplified version of the main relationship phase measure above. Instead, here, we only used the police-coded relationship status variable ('Violence Between Partners' or 'Violence Between Ex Partners') from the first sampled episode. In other words,

any further relationship phase-related information from across the study period was ignored; this measure represented a static, single point in time. The term *simplified intact* refers to cases where police labelled the first sampled episode as involving Partners. The term *simplified separated* refers to cases where police labelled the first sampled episode as involving Ex-Partners.

Police- and Victim-Identified Partner Stalking

We separately coded whether police and victims, respectively, used the words ‘stalker’, ‘stalked’, ‘harassed’, ‘stalking’ or ‘harassment’ to describe the aggressor or their behaviour.

Other Recorded Variables

We coded the presence of several other variables, such as victim fear, victim injuries, weapon use, strangulation, and whether the victim and aggressor had shared children.

Data Preparation

Several steps ensured the inter-rater reliability of researcher-coded variables. The first author trained a second coder using the coding protocol described below and a data dictionary detailing the above measures. We then independently coded 10% ($n = 115$) of the full sample to test inter-rater reliability. This coding protocol involved two phases. In phase one, we coded all researcher-coded variables apart from overall partner stalking (but including individual NCVS/SVS stalking behaviours). Based on Landis and Koch’s (1977) criteria, we removed three types of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviours (Third parties, Spyware, Social media) with ‘no agreement’ (i.e. values ≤ 0). We resolved any disagreements through discussion. In phase two, we focused exclusively on cases with at least one NCVS/SVS stalking behaviour coded during phase one ($n = 39$) to independently code overall partner

stalking. Based on the inter-rater reliability results for retained variables across both phases⁵, the first author independently coded all remaining cases ($n = 1035$).

Sample

Most sampled aggressors were men ($n = 957$, 83.2%) and most victims were women ($n = 966$, 84.0%). Aggressors and victims were of similar ages ($M_{agg} = 35.3$ years, $SD = 11.7$ years; $M_{vic} = 33.5$ years, $SD = 11.3$ years; range 16 to 77 years). Aggressors and victims were commonly identified by police as European ($n_{agg} = 539$, 46.9%; $n_{vic} = 544$, 47.3%) or New Zealand Māori ($n_{agg} = 482$, 41.9%; $n_{vic} = 452$, 39.3%). Less commonly, aggressors and victims were identified as African ($n_{agg} = 1$, 0.1%; $n_{vic} = 3$, 0.2%), Asian ($n_{agg} = 31$, 2.7%; $n_{vic} = 25$, 2.2%), Latin American ($n_{agg} = 2$, 0.2%; $n_{vic} = 0$, 0.0%), Middle Eastern ($n_{agg} = 2$, 0.2%; $n_{vic} = 1$, 0.1%), Pasifika ($n_{agg} = 40$, 3.5%; $n_{vic} = 34$, 3.0%) or labelled ‘Other Ethnicity’ by NZP ($n_{agg} = 53$, 4.6%; $n_{vic} = 91$, 7.9%). Cases predominantly involved aggressors and victims with different genders ($n = 1128$, 98.2%) and the same ethnicity (e.g. when aggressors were identified as European, victims were also identified as European in 75.5% of cases; when aggressors were identified as Māori, victims were identified as Māori in 71.8% of cases).

Plan for Analyses

Police-coded sexual harm was rarely present ($n = 5$, 0.4%), so we removed this variable prior to analysis. At the other end of the spectrum, police-coded verbal harm was ubiquitous ($n = 1113$, 96.8%) so we removed this variable prior to analysis. Instead, we created and analysed a related variable called ‘Verbal harm only’, which captured when verbal harm, but no other police-coded harm type, was identified.

⁵ As per Landis and Koch’s (1977) criteria, six variables showed substantial agreement (0.61-0.80): Followed, Unwanted phone contact, Reputation damage, Other messages, Victim-identified partner stalking, Weapon use; and 12 variables showed almost perfect agreement (0.81-1.00): Forced/covert entry, Waited, Showed up, Inappropriate gifts, Location tracking, Shared children, Victim fear, Relationship instability, Victim injury, Police-identified stalking, Strangulation, Partner stalking.

We conducted all analyses in IBM SPSS Statistics version 28. We used descriptive statistics to summarise the prevalence of partner stalking overall and across different relationship phases, the rates of police and victim-identified partner stalking, and the presence of other recorded variables. We also used descriptive statistics to provide insights about the modified versions of partner stalking and relationship phase, respectively, but we did not use these supplementary variables in any of the statistical analyses. Next, we examined the differences between IPV cases with and without partner stalking using phi coefficients, Chi-square tests, and Independent Samples t-tests. Finally, we conducted a Binary Logistic Regression to predict (researcher-identified) partner stalking using other recorded variables. Because the IPV reported episode count variable violated the linearity assumption for the binary logistic regression (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), we transformed it from a continuous variable into four categorical ‘bins’ (i.e. 1, 2, 3–4, ≥ 5 episodes).

Results

Prevalence Rates

Overall, we identified partner stalking in 13.8% ($n = 159$) of all sampled cases. In other words, approximately one in every seven IPV cases reported to NZP involved partner stalking. The most common NCVS/SVS stalking behaviour type, evident in almost one fifth of cases ($n = 217$, 18.9%), involved the aggressor showing up to the victim’s house, work or another location without a legitimate reason and often forcing some sort of interaction with the victim. The next most frequently recorded type of NCVS/ SVS stalking behaviour involved the aggressor making unwanted contact with the victim via calls or texts ($n = 122$, 10.6%). Other types of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviours were rarely recorded (Followed $n = 38$, 3.3%; Forced/covert entry $n = 58$, 5.0%; Waited $n = 9$, 0.8%; Inappropriate gifts $n = 10$, 0.9%; Location tracking $n = 5$, 0.4%; Reputation damage $n = 28$, 2.4%; Unwanted cyber contact $n = 26$, 2.3%). Additionally, the partner stalking prevalence rate *with the fear*

standard dropped to 6.7% ($n = 77$) of all sampled cases; approximately one in every 15 IPV cases reported to NZP involved partner stalking with the fear standard.

Relationship Phase

As per Table 2, intact relationships were the most common category overall, but we rarely identified partner stalking during this relationship phase. Compared to IPV cases without partner stalking, IPV cases with partner stalking were significantly less likely to involve an intact relationship between the aggressor and victim. On the other hand, we frequently identified partner stalking across both the on–off and separated relationship phases; these two relationship categories accounted for over 90% of all partner stalking cases. Compared to IPV cases without partner stalking, IPV cases with partner stalking were significantly more likely to involve an on–off or separated relationship between the aggressor and victim.

Additionally, we examined partner stalking prevalence across relationship categories as per the simplified relationship phase measure. Using the dichotomous police-coded relationship status from the first sampled episode only, 33 previously on–off cases would have been reclassified as (simplified) intact and 42 previously on–off cases would have been reclassified as (simplified) separated. Overall, this simplified relationship measure would have classified 29.6% ($n = 47$) of all partner stalking cases as intact, 67.9% ($n = 108$) as separated, and 2.5% ($n = 4$) as missing relationship phase data.

Police- and Victim-Identified Partner Stalking

Despite commonly including statements that indicated the presence of partner stalking (and met our definitional criteria), few police or victims explicitly identified that stalking was occurring. Police identified stalking in only 8.2% ($n = 13$) of the cases that met our main criteria for partner stalking (i.e. not the Partner Stalking with Fear Standard measure).

Victims were recorded by police as having identified stalking in 9.4% ($n = 15$) of partner stalking cases.

Table 2. Differences Between IPV Cases With and Without Partner Stalking

Variable	Overall	Cases without stalking	Cases with stalking	Stalking-related differences		
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	χ^2 (df)	ϕ	<i>p</i>
Relationship phase				142.390 (2)	.352	< .001
Intact	601 (52.3)	587 (59.2)	14 (8.8)			
Separated	225 (19.6)	159 (16.0)	66 (41.5)			
On-off	324 (28.2)	245 (24.7)	79 (49.7)			
Shared children	536 (46.6)	449 (45.3)	87 (54.7)	4.875 (1)	.065	.017
Alcohol use	440 (38.3)	387 (39.1)	53 (33.3)	1.897 (1)	-.041	.168
Drug use	175 (15.2)	125 (12.6)	50 (31.4)	37.667 (1)	.181	< .001
Verbal harm only	414 (36.0)	368 (37.1)	46 (28.9)	4.002 (1)	-.059	.45
Physical harm	486 (42.3)	428 (43.2)	58 (36.5)	2.529 (1)	-.047	.112
Property damage	239 (20.8)	188 (19.0)	51 (32.1)	14.293 (1)	.111	< .001
Threats of harm	245 (21.3)	177 (17.9)	68 (42.8)	50.697 (1)	.210	< .001
Victim injury	203 (17.7)	178 (18.0)	25 (15.7)	0.472 (1)	-.020	.492
Strangulation	99 (8.6)	87 (8.8)	12 (7.5)	0.264 (1)	-.015	.607
Victim fear	246 (21.4)	169 (17.1)	77 (48.3)	80.207 (1)	.264	< .001
Weapon use	144 (12.5)	109 (11.0)	35 (22.0)	15.173 (1)	.115	< .001
Episode location/s				9.543 (1)	.091	.002
Dwelling only	903 (78.5)	793 (80.0)	110 (69.2)			
Public place (at least one episode)	247 (21.5)	198 (20.0)	49 (30.8)			
Risk level assigned at index episode ^				37.624 (2)	.182	< .001
High	673 (58.5)	544 (55.6)	129 (81.1)			
Medium	212 (18.4)	195 (19.9)	17 (10.7)			
Low	252 (21.9)	239 (24.4)	13 (8.2)			

Note. ^ 13 cases with missing data on this variable.

Differences Between IPV Cases With and Without Partner Stalking

Table 2 presents the overall rates of other recorded variables. Comparison of these variables across cases with and without partner stalking revealed several differences; significant effect sizes ranged from 0.07 to 0.35, reflecting weak to moderate relationships (Cohen, 2013). Threats, property damage, drug use, victim fear (recall that we did not require the fear standard to define partner stalking in this study), weapon use, shared children between the victim and aggressor, a high NZP risk assessment rating at the first sampled episode, and at least one reported episode occurring in a public place were all recorded significantly more often in IPV cases with partner stalking than without. European aggressors were significantly more likely to perpetrate partner stalking than Māori aggressors. No between-group differences were found for aggressor age ($t [1,147] = -1.12, p = .264$, two-tailed; stalking $M = 35.7$ years, $SD = 10.1$; non-stalking $M = 34.6, SD = 11.6$), but IPV cases with partner stalking had a higher number of IPV episodes reported to NZP (during the study period) than IPV cases without partner stalking ($t [1,148] = -7.00, p < .001$, two-tailed; stalking $M = 3.2, SD = 2.8$; non-stalking $M = 1.7, SD = 1.3$).

As shown in Table 3, we estimated a logistic regression model to determine which variables predicted partner stalking. This model was significant overall, and the Pseudo R^2 estimate suggested a good fit. Several of the earlier differences remained significant predictors of partner stalking in this model. Victim fear, threats, a higher number of reported IPV episodes, verbal harm only, a high-risk rating at the first sampled episode (compared to a low-risk rating), and a separated or on-off relationship phase (compared to intact relationships) were each uniquely associated with increased odds of partner stalking. Finally, ethnicity was significantly associated with partner stalking: Māori aggressors had decreased odds of partner stalking, compared to European aggressors.

Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression using Other Variables to Predict Partner Stalking

Variable	B	SE	Wald χ^2	<i>p</i>	OR [95% CI]
Aggressor age	0.02	0.01	2.10	.148	1.02 [0.99-1.04]
Woman as aggressor ¹	0.30	0.39	0.73	.394	1.36 [0.67-2.72]
Aggressor ethnicity:			19.87	< .001	
European					
Māori	-1.15	0.27	18.42	< .001	0.32 [0.19-0.54]
Pasifika	0.24	0.66	0.13	.716	1.27 [0.35-4.59]
Asian	0.22	0.62	0.13	.722	1.25 [0.37-4.20]
Relationship phase: Intact			64.63	< .001	
Separated	3.13	0.39	64.60	< .001	22.97 [10.70-49.32]
On-off	1.82	0.36	25.72	< .001	6.17 [3.05-12.47]
Shared children	0.06	0.24	0.06	.800	1.06 [0.67-1.70]
Alcohol use	-0.10	0.25	0.16	.692	0.91 [0.55-1.49]
Drug use	0.25	0.28	0.81	.367	1.29 [0.74-2.23]
Verbal harm only	0.97	0.39	6.16	.013	2.65 [1.23-5.71]
Physical harm	-0.42	0.34	1.55	.214	0.66 [0.34-1.27]
Property damage	0.54	0.30	3.24	.072	1.71 [0.95-3.06]
Threats	0.79	0.32	6.36	.012	2.21 [1.19-4.10]
Victim injury	0.15	0.37	0.17	.683	1.16 [0.56-2.41]
Strangulation	-1.05	0.50	4.54	.033	0.35 [0.13-0.92]
Victim fear	1.20	0.25	23.46	< .001	3.30 [2.04-5.36]
Weapon use	0.41	0.33	1.51	.219	1.51 [0.78-2.90]
Public episode/s	-0.04	0.26	0.02	.886	0.96 [0.58-1.61]
Episode count: 1 only			55.86	< .001	
2 episodes	1.36	0.32	18.48	< .001	3.90 [2.10-7.24]
3-4 episodes	2.48	0.39	40.56	< .001	11.93 [5.56-25.60]
5 or more episodes	3.26	0.48	45.44	< .001	25.93 [10.06-66.83]
Risk level: Low			6.46	.004	
High	0.79	0.40	3.86	.049	2.20 [1.00-4.81]
Medium	0.17	0.48	0.13	.716	1.19 [0.47-3.05]
Constant	-6.53	0.77	71.89	< .001	0.00
Model			Pseudo R ² = .47, χ^2 (24) = 316.27, <i>p</i> < .001		

Note. Pseudo R² is Nagelkerke. SE = standard error, OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval. ¹ = Men as reference category.

Discussion

To understand more about the overlap between IPV and partner stalking within a police practice context, we analysed 1150 cases of IPV reported to NZP. Building on three foundational studies (Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the current study adds to a small body of empirical evidence using police data to establish partner stalking prevalence rates in reported IPV cases, highlight rates of police- and victim-

identified partner stalking, and explore differences between IPV cases with and without partner stalking. To our knowledge, this study is the first to include three categories—representing dynamics for intact, on–off and separated relationships—when considering the relevance of the victim’s and aggressor’s relationship phase in defining partner stalking. We discuss each of these contributions in turn.

Focusing on our first main research question, this study confirmed that partner stalking commonly occurs in IPV cases reported to NZP; we identified partner stalking in one in every seven cases sampled. This rate aligned with findings from prior United States based studies that used similar methods (Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Together, these findings suggest that partner stalking in IPV cases presents at similar rates to police across multiple jurisdictions, irrespective of local stalking legislation.

We briefly note other details relating to partner stalking prevalence in this study. The most frequently recorded types of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviour involved the aggressor showing up to the victim’s house without a legitimate reason or making unwanted phone contact. In comparison, other types of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviours were rarely recorded; but the covert nature of several of these behaviours (e.g. the aggressor tracking the victim via technology) may have reduced victim awareness and third-party detection (Ménard & Cox, 2016). Additionally, the partner stalking prevalence rate lowered when we required evidence of the fear standard, which aligns with fear standard-related findings from the general stalking literature (e.g. Owens, 2016). This finding highlights how different ways of defining and measuring partner stalking—even while using the same data—produce different prevalence estimates.

Addressing our next main research question, we rarely identified partner stalking within intact relationships. Instead, we identified partner stalking significantly more frequently, and at similar rates, across both the separated *and* on–off relationship phases. This

finding is interesting when considering the inconsistencies around conceptualising the overlap between IPV and partner stalking, and the relevance of relationship phases to defining partner stalking. Recall that one approach conceptualised partner stalking as a behavioural subtype of IPV, irrespective of the relationship phase in which stalking occurred (e.g. Basile & Hall, 2011; Breiding et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2022; Logan & Walker, 2010; Mechanic et al., 2000); whereas the other approach notes that IPV during the relationship and stalking post-relationship may be characterised by similar behaviours, so primarily distinguished the two phenomena using the aggressor's and victim's relationship status (e.g. Ferreira & Matos, 2013; McEwan et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). While our definition and measurement of partner stalking aligned with the former approach, the findings suggest that partner stalking may be most directly related to relationship breakdown in the on-off and separated relationship phases. Thus, relationship phase appears to be an important criterion for defining partner stalking and conceptualising the overlap between partner stalking and IPV.

In comparing different ways of measuring relationship phase, our findings also provided empirical evidence about the benefits of examining three relationship phase categories. Without including the on-off category to our analysis, several stalking cases were artificially labelled as intact when, in fact, information about the aggressor's and victim's relationship instability or breakdown was available in the data. As such, we demonstrated that dichotomous, static measures of relationship phase can contaminate comparisons of partner stalking prevalence between intact and separated groups. To the extent that such analysis is possible (i.e. depending on the level of relationship phase related information recorded in any given dataset), this finding highlights the value of accounting for the complexities of relationship dynamics across time, rather than relying on dichotomised relationship information from a single point in time.

Turning to our last main research question, this study demonstrates that few police or victims explicitly identified partner stalking, even though information that met the criteria for partner stalking was disclosed by involved parties and recorded by police. Police-identified stalking in just one in every 12 partner stalking cases. Similarly, victims identified stalking in one in every nine partner stalking cases. Overall, our police and victim identified partner stalking rates aligned with other research (e.g. Klein et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Together, the current and previous findings suggest that even when police capture partner stalking-related information in their records, a disparity exists between police and victims reporting this information and explicitly identifying this phenomenon as stalking.

Across criminal justice system processes, under-identification and mislabelling is a challenge for all types of stalking (Bouffard et al., 2021; Brady & Nobles, 2017). Within the context of IPV, what remains unknown is whether low partner stalking identification rates mean that police (and other practitioners) might be missing stalking behaviours in their appraisals of harm and corresponding risk assessments, or recognising these behaviours but instead labelling them as another form of IPV (e.g. psychological IPV). We were not able to examine these possible explanations directly in our study. But either may be problematic for victim safety, with researchers and practitioners arguing that under-identification and mislabelling of partner stalking could lead to stalking-specific risks and support needs being overlooked (Dreke et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019).

Finally, regarding the secondary research question, this study compared IPV cases with and without partner stalking to examine differences across other recorded variables. Few differences were found that were consistent across bivariate and multivariate analyses in this study, and also aligned with findings from the key studies summarised in Table 1. Here, we focus only on the differences that did align. Compared to IPV cases without partner stalking, partner stalking cases were more likely to involve threats (Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012)

and verbal harm (Melton, 2012), which likely points to an overlap between partner stalking and (other forms of) psychological violence in IPV cases (see Logan & Walker, 2009). Next, and consistent with the relationship status findings and conclusions above, a separated or on-off relationship between the victim and aggressor was more likely (than an intact relationship) in IPV cases with partner stalking than without (Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

However, because most of the examined variables yielded non-significant or inconsistent relationships in analyses across the current and previous studies (Garza et al., 2020; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), this analysis only represents a preliminary building block. More robust empirical research is needed to quantify factors that systematically differ between IPV cases with and without partner stalking before clear conclusions can be drawn. Practically, such knowledge could then inform targeted interventions for IPV aggressors that also stalk their victims. Theoretically, the empirical relationships between partner stalking and other factors could be organised into a theoretical framework in the first instance; and a multifactor theory as explanations develop about the causal mechanisms underpinning these empirical relationships (Ward & Hudson, 1998).

Limitations

We remain mindful of general limitations relating to studies that use police data. The dark figure of crime is an ever-present issue; estimates suggest that two thirds of IPV (and non-IPV family violence) is never reported to NZP (New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey, 2022). Further, and consistent with the low number of same-gender couples, male victims and gender diverse individuals sampled in this study, concerns about under-reporting are disproportionately heightened for these groups (Brooks et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2022). Thus, the findings may not generalise to IPV cases that do not come to the attention of police.

More specifically, even for IPV cases that are reported to police, the level of information *disclosed* by involved parties and *recorded* by police varies. Of note, NZP officers responding to IPV are prompted to record information about other harm types (e.g. physical violence, property damage, strangulation), but no specific prompts currently exist for systematically gathering and recording partner stalking-related information. This issue has been raised in other police jurisdictions (e.g. Garza et al., 2020). Therefore, our stalking findings may be conservative relative to other forms of IPV reported to police and are limited by the inherent uncertainty around how victims' disclosure patterns and police recording practices relate to each other. Further, although increasingly comprehensive stalking legislation in other jurisdictions has not translated into meaningful improvements in policing stalking (Bouffard et al., 2021; Brady & Nobles, 2017), it remains unclear whether this study's results would differ if New Zealand laws explicitly criminalised partner stalking.

We briefly note several other limitations. First, given the wide variability in defining and measuring partner (and other types of) stalking across the literature, other researchers may challenge the definition and measurement decisions made in this study. However, we have attempted to comprehensively describe both the rationale for them and the decisions themselves, to enable robust comparisons with future studies. Second, we measured the relationship phase categories using data available for the six-month study period. As such, we could not determine how many cases that were categorised as intact or separated (using our main relationship phase measure) would have been more correctly identified as 'on-off' if we had access to (a) data captured by police before and after the study period or (b) interview data from the victim or aggressor directly. Our frequency estimates for the on-off relationship category therefore remain conservative. However, even with this caveat, the focus on on-off relationships represents a novel—and, we argue, worthwhile—approach to understanding relationship phases within the context of IPV and partner stalking, and lends

credence to arguments that stalking is a function of relationship breakdown and separation (McEwan et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). Third, we note there may be specific dynamics that made sampled victims less likely to disclose, or know about, stalking behaviours that occurred during an intact relationship; but this issue could not be examined using the current study's data. Finally, based on the number of IPV episodes reported to NZP for each couple during the study period, the level of available data for each case varied considerably. Partner stalking was more likely to be identified in cases with a higher number of reported IPV episodes during the study period than in cases with fewer reported IPV episodes; but we could not determine if partner stalking involved more complex dynamics than (other forms of) IPV alone and so required a higher level of ongoing police contact, or whether this finding was an artefact of having more police data available in which to find stalking-related information.

Practical Implications

Keeping in mind that partner stalking in IPV cases reported to police appears relatively common, but few police and victims explicitly identify partner stalking, we briefly outline some practical implications related to improving partner stalking awareness. Focusing on victims, these findings suggest that educational interventions could be valuable. For example, material aimed at improving victim awareness of what constitutes partner stalking could be disseminated via several channels: including specialist IPV support services, criminal justice and social support services, and to the wider community through public health campaigns.

Focusing next on police, these findings could be used to highlight the potential value of partner stalking identification training for frontline staff. Researchers have cited stalking-specific training as an important endeavour for police internationally (Backes et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2020; Brady & Nobles, 2017; Garza et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2009; Melton,

2012; Taylor-Dunn et al., 2021; Thorburn & Jury, 2019; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

However, as flagged, this study (and, arguably, other research to date) cannot determine whether the low rates of police-identified partner stalking mean that police overlook partner stalking in their appraisals of harm and assessments of risk, or recognise these patterns of behaviour but instead label them as other forms of IPV (e.g. psychological IPV). As such, we more conservatively suggest a practical implication relating to relationship phases. Training could emphasise the value of systematically capturing on–off relationships when responding to IPV cases with and without partner stalking, and police could consider adding this third relationship phase category to data collection prompts. Finally, and more generally, monitoring of stalking by internal police research teams could be valuable in further developing policy and best practice guidelines for police when responding to IPV cases with partner stalking.

Future Research

Ongoing research is necessary to better inform police practices around partner stalking (Backes et al., 2020) and several possible directions could build on the current study's findings. First, one such direction could involve researchers analysing the relationship between partner stalking and psychological violence in IPV cases reported to police. Second, and to extend insights relating to relationship phases, researchers could explore if rates of police- and victim-identified partner stalking differ based on whether the victim's and aggressor's relationship was categorised as intact, on–off or separated when partner stalking occurred. Using this more refined specification of relationship phases in future research may also highlight different levels of risk and case management implications for stalking that occurs during on–off phases versus longer-term, stable separation. A third direction could involve researchers focusing on partner stalking, risk assessments and IPV-related outcomes. Regarding the former, future studies could analyse whether IPV cases with partner stalking

(or, separately, cases with police and victim identified partner stalking) predict higher subsequent police-rated risk ratings than cases without partner stalking. Regarding the latter, limited empirical evidence exists about the predictive utility of partner stalking for ongoing IPV (e.g. Jung et al., 2021). Thus, future studies could analyse whether partner stalking (or specific types of NCVS/SVS stalking behaviour) predict various longitudinal IPV outcomes, such as IPV recurrence and the presence or severity of specific harm types in IPV recurrence episodes reported to police.

More broadly, another aim of future research should be theory development. Such research could usefully use qualitative methods with aggressor or victim self-reported data to better describe the occurrence and function of partner stalking across different relationship phases. Even preliminary research of this nature would be valuable in advancing insights about the potential mechanisms underpinning partner stalking during different relationship phases, especially the on–off versus separated phases. Such research could provide a good foundation for addressing theoretical gaps within the partner stalking literature, including why partner stalking occurs in some relationships but not others, and the conceptual and behavioural overlaps between IPV—especially psychological IPV—and partner stalking.

Conclusion

We identified partner stalking within one in every seven cases reported to NZP, yet police and victims rarely explicitly identified and labelled this pattern of behaviour as stalking. Overall, these findings corroborate previous empirical findings about partner stalking in cases of IPV reported to police, across different police jurisdictions and legislative contexts (Garza et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2009; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Further, and to our knowledge, this study was the first to include three relationship phase categories in the investigation of partner stalking identification. We added the on–off phase to the typically dichotomised categories of intact and separated relationships; and, consequently,

avoided artificially labelling many cases as intact or separated and contaminating partner stalking prevalence estimates between the intact and separated groups. Accordingly, we then rarely identified partner stalking in intact relationships; and compared to IPV cases without partner stalking, IPV cases with partner stalking were significantly more likely to involve victims and aggressors with an on–off or separated relationship dynamic, which lends credence to the idea that relationship breakdown and separation represents an important criterion for defining partner stalking. This study represents a building block towards improving collective understandings of the overlap between IPV and partner stalking, and the relevance of the aggressor and victim’s relationship phase to defining partner stalking.

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Chapter 3: Study Two

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Heterogeneity in practitioners' definitions of partner stalking in intimate partner violence cases. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Abstract

Partner stalking represents a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define, especially in relation to other types of intimate partner violence (IPV). Drawing on interviews with specialist IPV practitioners, we explored practice-based definitions of partner stalking. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we found practitioners perceived partner stalking as a multidimensional construct, with an explicit emphasis on specific behaviors and an implicit emphasis on these behaviors as unwanted, repeated, monitoring-related, and causing the victim fear. Further, we found considerable heterogeneity in whether—and, if so, how—practitioners distinguished partner stalking from coercive control. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this heterogeneity in practitioners' understanding of partner stalking in IPV cases and highlight the need for urgent theory development in defining partner stalking.

Key Words: domestic violence, partner abuse, harassment, clinicians, qualitative research

Partner stalking and intimate partner violence (IPV) are complex phenomena that warrant attention from researchers and practitioners alike. But confusion persists around how best to define and measure (partner) stalking in the literature (e.g., Fox et al., 2010), and the distinctions—if any—between partner stalking and other IPV-related constructs, especially psychological abuse and coercive control (e.g., Logan & Walker, 2009). And it remains unclear whether these research ambiguities impact frontline practice. If, like some researchers (e.g., Dreke et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019) and practice guidelines (Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018) suggest, partner stalking requires identification, assessment, and response processes distinct from other types of harm in IPV cases, then such practice would require a robust understanding of partner stalking among practitioners. Accordingly, we explore specialist IPV practitioners' knowledge of partner stalking, and their perceptions of the connection between partner stalking and coercive control. In turn, we compare some of the conceptual challenges regarding partner stalking in frontline practice and in current research.

Defining and Measuring Stalking

Researchers commonly define stalking as an aggressor's pattern of repeated, unwanted behaviors—such as following the victim, showing up at their home or work, making unwanted phone contact, giving the victim unwanted gifts, monitoring the victim via tracking devices—that may cause the victim to feel fearful, threatened, or otherwise negatively impacted (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; McEwan et al., 2021). As such, researchers typically define stalking by how they measure it, with an emphasis on behavioral lists. And although the impact on victims is included in standard definitions, there is no contextual information regarding the aggressor. Although such a consideration is not specific for partner stalking legislation, it remains necessary to more effectively theorize about the potential causes of partner stalking and interventions for aggressors.

A further concern is the multiple sources of heterogeneity in how researchers measure stalking across individual studies. The specific types of behavior in stalking measures (e.g., Coleman, 1997; McEwan et al., 2020; Truman & Morgan, 2021; Turmanis & Brown, 2006) vary, largely without any clear rationale for item inclusion or exclusion. And researchers operationalize the repeated, unwanted, and victim fear (or negative impact) components in divergent ways (Fox et al., 2010; McEwan et al., 2021). First, the repeated component refers to an aggressor's recurrent pattern of behavior (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Most studies simply state that the behavior was either repeated without specifying further details or require a minimum of two stalking incidents (Fox et al., 2010). Second, the unwanted component refers to the victim experiencing stalking behaviors as unwelcome (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). This component is frequently included in measures of stalking (Fox et al., 2010). But researchers do not usually specify the criteria for ascertaining whether a behavior is unwanted, although such criteria could require the presence of a non-contact court order or the victim reporting an incident to police (Tomkins et al., 2023). Third, the victim impact component requires that the victim expresses fearfulness about the aggressor or is otherwise negatively impacted by the stalking victimization; or that a 'reasonable person' in the same situation would feel scared or threatened (McEwan et al., 2021; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). This final component is inconsistently included (Fox et al., 2010), with researchers debating its appropriateness due to individual differences and potential biases in fear expression, in particular (Dietz & Martin, 2007; Owens, 2016, 2017).

Distinguishing Between Partner Stalking and Other IPV Constructs

Major inconsistencies also exist in how researchers currently distinguish partner stalking from IPV overall, or from other IPV constructs. We identified two main perspectives from the literature. One approach positions partner stalking and IPV as related, but distinct, phenomena (e.g., Ferreira & Matos, 2013; McEwan et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). Here,

researchers make this distinction using the aggressor's and victim's relationship phase: partner stalking represents a phenomenon that occurs post-separation and IPV represents a phenomenon that occurs during intact relationships. As such, the key distinction between IPV and partner stalking in this approach is whether the couple are 'together' when the inappropriate behaviors occur (Tomkins et al., 2023). The other main approach positions partner stalking as a type of IPV, alongside physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (e.g., Breiding et al., 2014). Here, researchers distinguish partner stalking using the specific types of behavior perpetrated by the aggressor, irrespective of whether such behavior occurred during an intact or separated relationship phase (e.g., Krebs et al., 2011; Logan & Walker, 2010; Mechanic et al., 2000). Accordingly, this approach claims unique partner stalking behaviors exist and defines and measures stalking with a behavioral emphasis.

Arguably, neither of these approaches in isolation seem conceptually robust enough to meaningfully distinguish between partner stalking and other IPV-related constructs, especially given the complexity of operationalizing these definitional 'rules' to actual cases. For example, the dichotomization of intact versus separated relationships remains a limitation of the first approach, as it relies on relationship status as a key factor in differentiating between IPV and stalking, but then doesn't adequately account for the complexity of relationship dynamics. For example, this approach largely overlooks the on-off relationship phase experienced by some aggressors and victims, which refers to a dynamic involving the couple separating and reconciling at least once (Dailey et al., 2009). But this dynamic frequently appears in relationships with IPV (Logan et al., 2008; Tomkins et al., 2023), so it remains necessary to fully incorporate an understanding of on-off phases into approaches that rely on relationship status as an important factor for defining IPV and stalking.

And the oversimplified differentiation between partner stalking- and other IPV-related behaviors remains a key limitation of the latter approach. Prior research has demonstrated

significant, positive, and moderate to strong empirical relationships between partner stalking and physical, sexual, and psychological IPV (e.g., Basile et al., 2004; Krebs et al., 2011). These findings may reflect that (a) different forms of IPV commonly co-occur, (b) such considerable behavioral overlap exists between IPV types that differentiation between behaviors and constructs is not as easy or as relevant as this approach claims or (c) partner stalking does not represent a distinct construct from other types of IPV. Thus, attempts to distinguish partner stalking from other types of IPV using relationship phase or behaviors alone may be problematic.

Differentiation between partner stalking and psychological abuse is especially unclear. Behaviorally, some measures separate these constructs; partner stalking typically covers behaviors related to unwanted contact and monitoring of the victim (e.g., Truman & Morgan, 2021), whereas psychological abuse typically covers behaviors related to insulting, humiliating, intimidating, and controlling the victim (e.g., Breiding et al., 2014; Leemis et al., 2022). However, other sources explicitly define or measure partner stalking as a type of psychological abuse (e.g., New Zealand Family Violence Act, 2018; Follingstad, 2011). As such, confusion persists about the possible distinctions between psychological abuse and partner stalking (e.g., Dreke et al., 2020; Logan & Walker, 2009).

These same issues are mirrored when considering possible distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control. Coercive control refers to an ongoing pattern of behavior that is established and maintained by an aggressor over many or all facets of their victim's life (Stark, 2007). Using intimidating, isolating and controlling tactics, the aggressor compromises the victim's physical safety and their overall autonomy (e.g., access to resources, social connectedness; Stark, 2007). Similarly, researchers typically position partner stalking as either (a) distinct from coercive control (e.g., Davis et al., 2000; Katz & Rich, 2015; Ornstein & Rickne, 2013) or (b) a type of coercive control (e.g., Dutton &

Goodman, 2005; Hilton et al., 2022; Tutty et al., 2023), with Stark (2007) defining stalking in this context as representing surveillance and monitoring-related activities only.

And, as with stalking, researchers often define coercive control by how they measure it, typically via behavioral lists (Hamberger et al., 2017). Some measures of coercive control focus on behaviors related to put downs, humiliation, financial abuse, threats, intimidation, and isolation (e.g., Bledsoe & Sar, 2011; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Lehmann et al., 2012); implying that partner stalking represents a distinct construct from coercive control. However, other behavioral measures of coercive control explicitly include partner stalking (e.g., Hamel et al., 2015) and several researchers have defined or measured partner stalking as a type of coercive control (e.g., Hilton et al., 2023; Tutty et al., 2023). For example, Dutton and Goodman's (2005) model of coercion defined partner stalking as a key component contributing to the aggressor's achievement and maintenance of coercive control. Similarly, within the New Zealand practice context, legislation currently positions partner stalking as a type of coercive control and psychological abuse (New Zealand Family Violence Act, 2018).

Specialist IPV Practitioners' Understanding of Partner Stalking

Despite this confusion in the research literature, IPV practice guidelines often adopt a relatively strong position on partner stalking. Namely, several practice guidelines across different countries assign a special status to partner stalking, call it a *high-risk factor*, and indicate the need for identification, assessment, and response processes that are distinct from other types of IPV (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). This emphasis is largely based on a small, methodologically weak body of empirical evidence regarding the relationship between stalking and partner homicide (e.g., Campbell et al., 2003; McFarlane et al., 1999; see Sheed et al., 2024 for a critique). But it still remains largely unknown whether specialist IPV practitioners' perspectives align with the position

asserted in practice guidelines, or the extent to which their understanding of partner stalking may mirror the heterogeneity evident within the research literature.

To date, limited research has provided evidence directly related to how practitioners define and understand partner stalking, especially in the specialist IPV practice context. Focusing on practice-based definitions (albeit not from specialist IPV practitioners), a recent study found that criminal justice and victim services practitioners defined stalking in contradictory ways: namely, by focusing purely on the behaviors that represent stalking, describing the factors required by local stalking legislation, or explaining stalking as a means of the aggressor controlling the victim in cases of IPV (Villacampa & Salat, 2019). Another study similarly showed wide-ranging heterogeneity in criminal justice and victim services practitioners' overall understanding of partner stalking in IPV cases; for example, related to their perceptions of (a) seriousness and (b) the likelihood of victim self-identification, (c) prevalence estimates, and (d) recommendations for partner stalking-specific responses (Logan et al., 2006).

And although not focusing explicitly on practice-based definitions, other research considered specialist IPV practitioners' perceptions of the possible overlap between partner stalking and coercive control. These findings suggest that practitioners position partner stalking as either a distinct type of IPV (Thorburn & Jury, 2019), or as a type of coercive control; in turn, defining partner stalking "under the long list of behaviors within the category of 'power and control'—that general 'catch-all' term we use to talk about the ways abusers dominate their victims" (Dreke et al., 2020, p. 769). And specialist IPV practitioners interviewed in recent New Zealand research stated they have not received adequate partner stalking-specific training (Thorburn & Jury, 2019). Together, this evidence suggests heterogeneity in practitioners' understanding of partner stalking likely exists, but additional

research is required to better understand how specialist IPV practitioners define partner stalking, and whether they distinguish between partner stalking and other types of IPV.

The Current Study

Based on this review, multiple issues are evident within the current research. First, we posit that the frequently cited definition of stalking (i.e., a pattern of repeated, unwanted stalking behaviors that may cause the victim fear; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007) lacks the conceptual specificity required to reliably differentiate partner stalking from other harmful types of behavior within abusive relationships. In other words, although partner stalking is often regarded as a distinct and important phenomenon, the definition currently accepted in the research literature is not robust enough from a theoretical or practical perspective to support that view. Second, considerable heterogeneity exists in how different researchers measure stalking (e.g., regarding the types of stalking behaviors included and excluded, and how to operationalize the repeated, unwanted, and victim fear components; Fox et al., 2010). This heterogeneity hinders knowledge synthesis from across individual studies. We also argue that this measurement-related confusion is especially problematic given researchers appear to infer the definition of stalking through their measurement of stalking, rather than by using a well-developed and precise conceptual definition that then guides the measurement process. And third, perspectives on the possible distinctions between partner stalking and (a) IPV overall and (b) other types of IPV, especially coercive control, remain contradictory and inadequately developed from a theoretical perspective.

Overall, researchers often only reveal their assumptions about stalking partially and implicitly in their research (McEwan et al., 2020), so it is difficult to identify and address the sources of confusion regarding the constructs of both partner stalking and coercive control within current theory and research. Based on a minimal amount of (directly and indirectly relevant) evidence (e.g., Dreke et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019; Villacampa & Salat,

2019), these research issues *may* be mirrored in the IPV practice context in terms of how specialist IPV practitioners define partner stalking and whether they distinguish partner stalking from coercive control. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore specialist IPV practitioners' understanding of partner stalking and represents a building block towards better understanding these issues by making the implicit explicit.

Researchers have previously advocated for further exploration of the partner stalking and coercive control constructs, especially qualitatively (Hamberger et al., 2017; Hilton et al., 2023; Logan & Walker, 2009). Acting on these recommendations, we sought to better understand practice-based definitions of partner stalking by conducting and analyzing interviews with specialist IPV practitioners. This approach enabled us to explore the extent to which the lack of research clarity about partner stalking relates to frontline practice and produce insights that can contribute to better developing the definition of partner stalking and determining whether distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control are necessary. As such, we posed the following main research questions (1-3) and a secondary research question (4):

1. How do specialist IPV practitioners define partner stalking in IPV cases?
2. How does relationship phase (e.g., intact, separated) relate to practitioners' definitions of partner stalking?
3. Do practitioners distinguish between partner stalking and coercive control; if so, how?
4. What are practitioners' perceptions about the IPV sector's overall competence in understanding and responding to partner stalking?

Method

Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, we conducted and analyzed interviews with specialist IPV practitioners from non-governmental

family violence agencies in Christchurch, New Zealand. Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato.

Sample and Data Generation

We recruited participants through our professional networks. With support from Christchurch's multi-agency crisis response team for family violence (the Integrated Safety Response), we contacted 10 local family violence agencies. From there, we disseminated information about the study to practitioners in these agencies via a mix of email and face-to-face meetings. Interested practitioners contacted the research team directly and self-selected into the pool of potential participants. This recruitment process spanned September 2022 to April 2023. In total, we recruited 14 practitioners from across seven agencies, including three Kaupapa Māori agencies⁶. The practitioners worked with victims ($n = 7$), aggressors ($n = 5$) or both ($n = 2$). We provided each agency with a \$30 voucher per participant to recognize them supporting this study.

We conducted all interviews between October 2022 and June 2023. At the start of each interview, we discussed matters relating to confidentiality, data management, withdrawal from the project, dissemination of findings, and answered any questions the practitioners raised. All 14 practitioners recruited provided informed consent and participated in this study. The first author⁷ conducted all interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and, as per participants' preferences, was held face-to-face in a meeting room on-site at the relevant agency ($n = 13$) or via phone ($n = 1$). Based on participants' frontline experience, we invited them to discuss their knowledge and understanding of partner stalking in IPV cases. The semi-structured interview schedule included open-ended questions that explored (a) participants' definitions of partner stalking; their perceptions regarding (b) the

⁶ Agencies that provide culturally responsive IPV-related services to New Zealand's indigenous population.

⁷ The first author represented both an *insider researcher*, having previously worked as a frontline practitioner within the IPV sector in Christchurch, and an *outsider researcher*, given their capacity as a currently non-practicing researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

relevance of relationship phase to defining partner stalking and (c) the conceptual links between partner stalking versus coercive control; and (d) their judgements around the sector's overall professional competence in identifying and responding to partner stalking in IPV cases. Towards the end of the interviews, each participant was given a final opportunity to ask any questions or provide additional partner stalking-related information.

Data Analysis

We briefly note the theoretical positioning of this study's qualitative approach. Recall that we used Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach to reflexive thematic analysis. So, rather than seeking one objective truth from the data (i.e., a positivist approach), we used a relativist approach and sought to explore how practitioners made sense of partner stalking, developing this knowledge according to the local practice context, the experiences of participants, and the interactions between participants and researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As such, we used a primarily inductive orientation to the reflexive thematic analysis (i.e., our coding and theme development was grounded in the data); but our knowledge of the research literature also informed our engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

We audio-recorded all the interviews. The first author transcribed each interview, typically within one working day using a thorough orthographic style⁸, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). In total, this transcription process yielded over 122,000 words of raw data. We anonymized transcripts before analysis by using numerical pseudonyms based on interview order and removing identifying information (such as names, locations, client occupations). Participants were offered a copy of their interview transcript, though most declined.

To support transcription quality and as part of the familiarization process, we checked all transcripts against the audio-recordings approximately two months after completing the

⁸ An approach that captures a verbatim record, including features such as repetition, pauses, and laughter.

initial transcription process and re-read through each transcript multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following familiarization, we aimed to explore the phenomena—namely definitions of partner stalking and possible distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control—rather than describe practitioners’ individual perspectives. We generated initial codes based on analyzing the transcripts line-by-line and as a whole, using NVivo (2020, R1) software. After completing this process for each transcript, we collated all initial codes in a spreadsheet and checked for consistency and variability across the transcripts, before exploring and refining the data diagrammatically. Based on patterns we identified in the data, we then generated and reviewed possible themes. Individual reflections from, and group discussions between, the researchers were critical to this analysis generally, and to theme development specifically.

Results

We developed six themes, as summarized in Table 1. Although the results are presented in a relatively orderly fashion, considerable variation in practitioners’ perspectives was evident both across and within interviews, with the former representing between-subject variability and latter representing within-subject variability.

Table 1. *Summary of Research Questions with Corresponding Themes*

Number	Research Question	Theme
1	How do specialist IPV practitioners define partner stalking in IPV cases?	A behavioral definition for partner stalking, with multiple factors indirectly referenced
2	How does relationship phase relate to practitioners’ definitions of partner stalking?	Partner stalking as a phenomenon primarily between ex-partners
3		A) Distinct phenomena, distinguished by relationship phase

	Do practitioners distinguish between partner stalking and coercive control; if so, how?	B) Distinct phenomena, distinguished by types of behavior C) Overlapping phenomena, with partner stalking as a type of coercive control
4	What are practitioners' perceptions about the IPV sector's overall competence in understanding and responding to partnerstalking?	Professional competence in responding to partner stalking deemed important but variable

Theme 1: A Behavioral Definition for Partner Stalking, with Multiple Factors Indirectly Referenced

When asked to define partner stalking, most practitioners listed types of behavior that they perceived as characterizing partner stalking, instead of giving a definition. Behaviors commonly described included the aggressor following the victim; showing up at the victim's house, work, or other location without a legitimate reason; forcing entry onto the victim's property; involving third parties (e.g., to follow or gain information about the victim); and technology-facilitated behaviors (e.g., GPS tracking, hacking into the victim's accounts, using spyware, monitoring the victim's social media). Behaviors less commonly described included the aggressor giving the victim unwanted items and making unwanted phone contact. Some practitioners expressed uncertainty about whether these latter behaviors characterized partner stalking. Overall, and as highlighted in the quotations below, practitioners' explicit definitions of partner stalking were thus behaviorally focused.

I find stalking can be anything really. It doesn't have to be that he's lingering outside.

It can be through social media, it can be constant calling, it can be going through family members, can be stalking family members, it can be following them around.

Yeah, we see so many different ways of stalking. (Practitioner 11)

So, stalking to me, pretty much means somebody that is consistent with blowing up somebody's phone. It can look like them literally standing outside someone's house and watching them or having friends or family members watching somebody for them. There's many different forms of stalking that I have come across with clients that I have worked with. A lot of it is online as well; so, a lot of fake profiles will get created to try and stalk the other person, and some get quite creative in terms of using bank accounts as well, where they will transfer small amounts of money to leave a message here and there. So, it does, it has a big spectrum of what stalking might look like. (Practitioner 8)

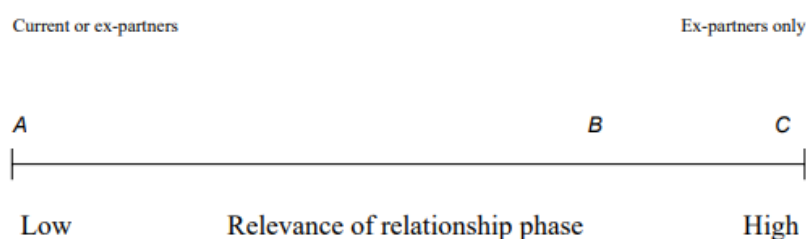
Throughout the interviews—though not directly in response to definition-related questions—practitioners referenced multiple other factors that we interpreted as implicitly shaping their definitions of partner stalking. We considered such factors implicit because they were not mentioned in response to being asked to define partner stalking, but still seemed to shape how practitioners decided whether partner stalking was occurring. First, practitioners emphasized (often repeatedly throughout interviews) that the pattern of partner stalking was unwanted by the victim. Second, several practitioners mentioned monitoring and surveillance of the victim as a key aim of aggressors who perpetrated partner stalking. Third, they framed partner stalking as relentless, persistent, and involving a barrage of unwanted contact. This type of language signaled the repetitive nature of the aggressor's behavior and suggested that it often occurred at so high a frequency as to be an intense experience for the victim. Finally, practitioners commonly referenced the aggressor's intention to scare the victim or the victim's experience of partner stalking-related fear.

Theme 2: Partner Stalking as a Phenomenon Primarily Between Ex-Partners

Practitioners' perspectives varied along the relationship phase continuum depicted in Figure 1. At one end of this continuum (point A), practitioners sometimes stated that partner

stalking reflected a pattern of behavior between current or ex partners (i.e., across any relationship phase), suggesting that relationship phase was an irrelevant factor for defining partner stalking. At the other end of this continuum (point C), practitioners sometimes stated that partner stalking reflected a pattern of behavior between ex-partners only, suggesting that relationship phase was a highly relevant factor for defining partner stalking. Other times, and as shown by point B, practitioners stated that partner stalking reflected a pattern of behavior that mainly occurred between ex-partners, but without any explicit emphasis on relationship phase as a factor for defining partner stalking. Here, partner stalking was framed as possible during intact relationships but more probable in separated relationships. However, regardless of the perspective articulated, practitioners almost exclusively gave examples of partner stalking cases involving ex-partners. Providing such examples—unprompted—suggested that separation was an important consideration in most practitioners’ understanding of partner stalking. Thus, overall, most practitioners explicitly or implicitly spoke about partner stalking as a phenomenon that primarily occurred between ex-partners.

Figure 1. *The Relevance of Relationship Phase to Defining Partner Stalking*



Relationship phase was also an important factor for determining whether behaviors would hypothetically meet the unwanted criterion. Practitioners stated that the unwanted nature of partner stalking was easy to establish if a victim had detached from the aggressor and established boundaries around non-contact, as is typically the case in a separated relationship phase. But—at least at the abstract level (i.e., when not actively working with a

client or unable to ask them directly)—some practitioners noted they found it difficult categorizing behaviors as unwanted by the victim amidst complexities in aggressor-victim relationships, such as if a couple were rapidly oscillating within an on/off relationship phase or if the stalking behaviors occurred during an intact relationship phase.

Partner Stalking and Coercive Control

Overall, practitioners' perspectives about the possible distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control varied according to the three themes described below.

Theme 3A: Distinct Phenomena, Distinguished by Relationship Phase

At times, practitioners framed partner stalking and coercive control as distinct phenomena and used relationship phase to make this distinction. Here, partner stalking was defined as a phenomenon that occurs between ex-partners in separated relationships and coercive control as a phenomenon that occurs between current partners in intact relationships. As Practitioner 12 stated: "I don't know why I've compartmentalized it like that; where if it's in a relationship, it's coercive control. But if it's not in the relationship, it's stalking. I don't know, it just makes sense in my brain." As such, most non-physically violent behavior was interpreted as partner stalking or coercive control, based on the relationship phase in which it occurred. For example, if the aggressor followed a partner, this behavior contributed to a pattern of coercive control; if the aggressor followed an ex-partner, this same behavior contributed to a pattern of partner stalking.

When defined this way, practitioners sometimes also discussed their thoughts about the underpinning mechanisms. For example, they stated that partner stalking involves illegitimate access to an ex-partner, a one-way dynamic from the aggressor to the victim, or physical and emotional distance between the aggressor and victim; implying that partner stalking may require one (or all) of these three factors as a precondition. As such, partner stalking victims do not want ongoing engagement with the aggressor; after establishing clear

boundaries around the end of a relationship, further contact and any stalking behaviors are explicitly non-consensual. In contrast, practitioners framed coercive control as involving legitimate access to the victim during a relationship, an interactive dynamic between the aggressor and victim, and greater physical proximity and emotional intimacy between the aggressor and victim. To these practitioners, experiencing coercive control implied that the victim consented to contact with the aggressor, even if the controlling behaviors were non-consensual and the victim felt unable to enact or maintain their boundaries around this behavior. Accordingly, based on this perspective, partner stalking and coercive control do not occur at the same time, but can occur during different phases across the same relationship.

But in the, in the relationship, I think they're coercive as they've already kind of got their hooks in. But when there's been that very clear separation, and 'I do not want any contact from you. Here are all the orders I have in place. And the relationship is done.' That's where I kind of class it more as stalking, like it's fully unwanted.

(Practitioner 6)

Because often stalking is, often, well, often as practitioners we classify stalking as something that happens after the relationship is over; whereas if the victim is still a willing participant of the relationship, we'd probably call it coercive control there. But once she's made very strong attempts to leave the relationship and it's, is still going on, then I would put it in the stalking bracket. (Practitioner 4)

Theme 3B: Distinct Phenomena, Distinguished by Types of Behavior

At other times, practitioners similarly asserted that partner stalking and coercive control represented different phenomena but instead used specific types of behaviors to make this distinction. Here, practitioners categorized behaviors as representing either partner stalking or coercive control, regardless of the relationship phase in which behaviors occurred. Types of stalking behavior included the aggressor following the victim; showing up at the

victim's house, work, or other location without a legitimate reason; forcing entry onto the victim's property; involving third parties (e.g., to follow, or gain information about, the victim); and technology-facilitated behaviors (e.g., GPS tracking, hacking into accounts, using spyware, monitoring the victim's social media). On the other hand, types of coercively controlling behavior included the aggressor using put downs, financial abuse, isolation, threats, intimidation, and damaging the victim's property. And because these terms covered distinct types of behaviors, practitioners asserted partner stalking and coercive control can occur at the same time within a relationship (e.g., the aggressor showing up to the victim's house, making threats to kill, and damaging the victim's car within one episode). However, when accounting for individual nuances in behaviors perpetrated in specific cases, practitioners could become confused about the exact boundaries between partner stalking versus coercive control.

Overall, when practitioners framed partner stalking and coercive control as distinct phenomena—based on relationship phase *or* behaviors—they often asserted that partner stalking occurred when the aggressor had lost control over the victim. Here, motives noted by practitioners included the aggressor's desire to reconcile with the victim or punish them for perceived ills. Conversely, based on these perspectives, practitioners asserted that coercive control occurred in situations where the aggressor had successfully developed and maintained some level of control over the victim. In turn, the associated motives included the aggressor's desire to restrict the victim's autonomy over their own life.

Theme 3C: Overlapping Phenomena, with Partner Stalking as a Type of Coercive Control

The final perspective articulated was where practitioners framed partner stalking and coercive control as highly overlapping phenomena, with partner stalking defined as a type of—and one way of maintaining—coercive control. For example, Practitioner 5 stated that “stalking would, from my experience, would come under the category of coercive control...

So, with stalking, it's just another form of coercive control." Here, practitioners regarded relationship phase as irrelevant, considering both partner stalking and coercive control as possible across intact and separated relationships. Similarly, practitioners regarded behavioral differences as largely irrelevant and, instead, this perspective involved framing most non-physically violent behaviors as related to both partner stalking and coercive control.

Practitioners often did not distinguish between partner stalking and coercive control at all, using these terms interchangeably as "catch-all" labels covering myriad behaviors. For example, Practitioner 6 stated that "maybe it's just all coercive control... I've never really separated it; I would say that is controlling and that is stalking". Similarly, Practitioner 12 stated that "I think stalking and coercive control are the same thing".

Practitioners also emphasized the aggressor's desire for control when taking this perspective and framed partner stalking as one of several ways that the aggressor developed and maintained a pattern of control over the victim. For example, individual stalking behaviors (e.g., hacking into the victim's accounts, following them) enabled the aggressor to monitor the victim's compliance with their demands, and to then control the victim more effectively. Practitioners emphasized the aggressor's need for control, stating traditional gender dynamics regarding masculinity supported both partner stalking and coercive control, as a manifestation of male privilege and power.

Theme 4: Professional Competence in Responding to Partner Stalking Deemed Important but Variable Across IPV Sector

Overall, practitioners consistently judged other practitioners' competence in identifying and responding to partner stalking in IPV cases as important. Rationales supporting this perceived importance included considering stalking dangerous; in turn, constituting the need for a shared understanding of stalking to support clear multi-agency communication about cases, accurate risk assessments, and effective responses for aggressors

and victims. However, practitioners perceived other practitioners' overall responsiveness to, and understanding of, partner stalking as ranging from satisfactory to unsatisfactory. Those who judged the sector as competent asserted that partner stalking was widely understood among practitioners and across agencies, accurately assessed, and clearly identified and labelled across cases. Those who judged the sector as less competent asserted the opposite and expressed concerns about the lack of partner stalking-specific training.

We identified other factors as potentially implicit indicators of practitioners' partner stalking-related competence. For example, several practitioners perpetuated stereotypes about partner stalking, with consensus among these practitioners that partner stalking was "creepy", and aggressors framed as "creeps in bushes". References to such stereotypes highlighted a possible lack of understanding about the realities of partner stalking. Additionally, inconsistencies were evident in the ways practitioners identified and labelled partner stalking. They often used the terms stalking, harassment, controlling behavior, and coercive control interchangeably. This fluidity in terms seemed unintentional; practitioners did not provide any clear demarcation for, or rationales underpinning, such term use.

Finally, we identified a potential contradiction regarding partner stalking identification. Practitioners said they normally avoided using the term stalking directly because most aggressors and victims did not use or like the term. As such, practitioners did not want to upset their clients by using this term. However, several practitioners expressed concerns about aggressors' and victims' low self-identification rates and framed identification and labelling as important factors for aggressor accountability and victim recovery. In other words, and irrespective of whether better outcomes are associated with accurate identification and labelling, practitioners believed clients should label self-stalking but did not directly support them to do so.

Discussion

To explore practice-based definitions of partner stalking, and possible distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control, we interviewed 14 specialist IPV practitioners. We focused on summarizing the main patterns across practitioners' perspectives on these topics. Overall, the within-subject and between-subject variability (i.e., within and across interviews) was an important issue in and of itself because it highlights the heterogeneity in how practitioners understand partner stalking. In addressing the four research questions, we discuss the key findings below and draw connections with prior research.

Our first research question sought to understand how specialist IPV practitioners define partner stalking in IPV cases. Overall, the findings indicate that practitioners primarily defined partner stalking behaviorally. They commonly listed the following types of aggressor behavior: following the victim; showing up at the victim's house, work, or other location without a legitimate reason; forcing entry onto the victim's property; involving third parties (e.g., to gain information about the victim); and technology-facilitated behaviors (e.g., GPS tracking, hacking into accounts, using spyware, monitoring the victim's social media). In alignment with popular stalking measures (e.g., Truman & Morgan, 2021), practitioners consistently cited combinations of these behaviors across interviews. On the other hand, practitioners less commonly defined unwanted gifts and unwanted phone contact as contributing towards a pattern of partner stalking. But prior research shows that these latter behaviors are usually included in stalking measures and that stalking victims frequently endorse having experienced these behaviors (Coleman, 1997; McEwan et al., 2020; Turmanis & Brown, 2006). Overall, when explicitly asked to define partner stalking, practitioners tended to simply list the specific types of behavior that they perceived as representing partner stalking, without abstracting a common or overarching definition based on that list. Previous

research has shown that other social service and criminal justice practitioners often similarly define stalking behaviorally (Villacampa & Salat, 2019).

Throughout the interviews, practitioners also referenced other factors that we interpreted as implicitly shaping their overall definitions of partner stalking; such factors were not mentioned in response to being asked to define partner stalking, but practitioners appeared to use these factors to decide whether partner stalking was occurring. Such factors included whether behaviors were unwanted by the victim, repeated over time, and caused the victim fear. Within each interview, practitioners' references to these factors varied in terms of both emphasis and language use. Accordingly, the way in which we collated and interpreted these factors was somewhat shaped by how prior research defined and measured stalking (e.g., Fox et al., 2010; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), rather than practitioners explicitly linking these factors to how they defined partner stalking. Of note, practitioners additionally referenced that stalking behavior typically served a surveillance and monitoring-related function for aggressors. This consideration is missing from most stalking definitions; although aligned with Stark's (2007) perspective that—both behaviorally and functionally—stalking facilitates the aggressor's monitoring and surveillance of the victim, alongside a pattern of wider coercive control. Overall, these findings suggested that practitioners perceived partner stalking as a multidimensional phenomenon; with an explicit emphasis on stalking behaviors and an implicit emphasis on whether these behaviors were unwanted, repeated, monitoring-related, and caused the victim fear.

Turning to our second research question, we explored whether relationship phase related to practitioners' definitions of partner stalking. On the face of it, practitioners deemed this factor as either relevant or irrelevant. This dichotomous approach aligned with prior research. Researchers similarly positioned relationship phase as either relevant (e.g., McEwan et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021) or irrelevant (e.g., Breiding et al., 2014; Krebs et al., 2011;

Logan & Walker, 2010; Mechanic et al., 2000) when defining partner stalking and distinguishing it from other IPV-related constructs. However, despite this variation in the asserted relevance of relationship phase, practitioners maintained an almost exclusive emphasis on ex-partners each time they discussed a real partner stalking case. This finding highlighted a potential disconnect between practitioners' ideas about partner stalking versus their actual experiences. Additionally, several practitioners seemed to use relationship phase as a conceptual shorthand for the unwanted component, especially when discussing partner stalking in abstract terms (i.e., the practitioner labelling a pattern of behavior as partner stalking without asking a client directly).

Addressing our next research question, we identified considerable heterogeneity in whether—and, if so, how—practitioners distinguished partner stalking from coercive control. Some practitioners consistently positioned partner stalking and coercive control as either distinct or overlapping phenomena. But most practitioners expressed contradictory views—representing each of the perspectives—at different points within their interviews. And even when practitioners positioned partner stalking and coercive control as distinct phenomena, the rules they used varied; recall that distinctions were primarily based on relationship phase, or the specific types of behavior used by the aggressor. Practitioners found these rules did not adequately account for individual nuances in behaviors perpetrated in specific cases. Further rationale was not often attempted; though some practitioners implied the concepts were obvious without articulating any clear explanations, instead expressing 'it is what it is' type sentiments. Overall, these findings point to a heterogeneity in how practitioners perceive these constructs, and a lack of clarity and consistency in what the terms partner stalking and coercive control represent.

To summarize, the main ways that practitioners perceived partner stalking included explaining this construct (a) as a phenomenon distinct from coercive control, distinguished by

either relationship phase *or* types of behavior, or (b) as a type of coercive control. And these perspectives are mirrored in prior research. First, distinctions based on relationship phase are common. Some researchers position all abusive behaviors as partner stalking during separated relationships and all abusive behaviors as coercive control or other types of IPV during intact relationships (e.g., McEwan et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). Second, behavioral distinctions are also common. Other researchers define partner stalking as representing behaviors such as following the victim, making unwanted telephone contact, and tracking a victim's online activity; and define coercive control (or psychological abuse) as representing behaviors such as put downs, financial abuse, isolating the victim, and threats (e.g., Breiding et al., 2014; Krebs et al., 2011; Logan & Walker, 2010). And third, positioning partner stalking as a type of (rather than as distinct from) coercive control aligns with Stark's (2007) influential conceptualization of coercive control, Dutton and Goodman's (2005) model of coercion, and several other researchers' definitions and measurements of coercive control (e.g., Hilton et al., 2023; Tutty et al., 2023). Accordingly, based on practitioners' and researchers' views, a lack of clarity persists in whether— and, if so, how—distinctions should be made between partner stalking and coercive control. This confusion adds weight to wider concerns that researchers cannot be certain if low rates of partner stalking identified by practitioners suggest practitioners overlook partner stalking entirely or recognize these behaviors but then categorize them as other types of IPV, such as coercive control (Tomkins et al., 2023). Together, these findings highlight concerns that, at least currently (and without clear training), practitioners may not consistently identify, define, or understand whether partner stalking and coercive control are distinct or overlapping phenomena.

Finally, we explored practitioners' broader perceptions about the sector's overall competence in understanding and addressing partner stalking. At an abstract level, practitioners consistently deemed partner stalking as a dangerous phenomenon and an

important practice consideration that required identification, assessment, and response processes distinct from other types of harm in IPV cases. This perspective aligned with practice guidelines (e.g., Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018) and prior research (e.g., Dreke et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019). However, practitioners perceived the actual knowledge and competence levels as mixed within the sector. Such concerns are reinforced by the myriad inconsistencies outlined in the findings above and by prior research demonstrating partner stalking-related practice issues in specialist IPV or other criminal justice and social service practice contexts (e.g., Dreke et al., 2020; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Tomkins et al., 2023; Villacampa & Salat, 2019). Further, practitioners' perpetuation of partner stalking stereotypes indicated a possible lack of understanding about partner stalking (and seems misaligned to their experience in dealing with other physically and sexually violent behaviors), which may negatively impact their clients' willingness to self-identify partner stalking.

Theoretical Implications

These findings highlight the heterogeneity in practice-based definitions of partner stalking. Given the inconsistencies both within and across interviews, the reliance on definitional approaches that focus primarily on relationship phase *or* type of behavior was common but seems insufficient for comprehensively defining partner stalking and drawing conclusions about possible distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control. Arguably, these delineations produce rigid, oversimplified lists about what does and does not get classified as stalking rather than accounting for the potential complexities of this phenomenon. Practice-based definitions thus represent a relatively primitive construct of partner stalking.

So, while theory development is urgently required, one implication of this research could involve intentionally positioning partner stalking—especially when focusing on the

surveillance- and monitoring-related nature of stalking, as was the case with these practitioners and in wider IPV research (e.g., Stark, 2007)—under the umbrella construct of coercive control; rather than, at times, inconsistently positioning partner stalking as a standalone construct. This approach makes sense given the high levels of confusion demonstrated by practitioners when trying to explain distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control.

Alternatively, another implication could be integrating the key factors that practitioners (and researchers) already use into a multi-faceted approach for defining partner stalking and distinguishing partner stalking from other types of IPV-related harm. Such an approach could incorporate both relationship phase and types of behavior. Accordingly, partner stalking would be defined as a phenomenon that only occurs between ex-partners, *and* only involves the key types of stalking behaviors identified by practitioners (e.g., following the victim, showing up, hacking into the victim's accounts); rather than all abusive behaviors being defined as IPV in intact relationships and stalking in separated relationships or certain behaviours being defined as stalking across any relationship phase. And coercive control would be defined as a phenomenon that only occurs between current partners, *and* only involves the key types of controlling behaviors identified by practitioners (e.g., put downs, financial abuse, isolation, threats, intimidation, property damage). Although representing a potential advancement, ultimately, using these combined approaches to define partner stalking and distinguish partner stalking from coercive control does not overcome the relationship phase-related limitations raised in the introduction, and noted as an issue by some practitioners.

Practical Implications

Overall, this study points to an apparent disconnect between IPV practice guidelines and the sector's current capacity to implement partner stalking-specific recommendations

from these guidelines. Albeit based on limited evidence (Sheed et al., 2024), recall that guidelines imply the need for identification, assessment, and response processes for stalking that are distinct from other types of harm in IPV cases (Ministry of Justice, 2017; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). To adhere to these recommendations, practitioners would need robust, shared knowledge about partner stalking, but the current findings showed considerable heterogeneity in practitioners' abilities to define and label this phenomenon or distinguish it from other types of IPV-related harm. Accordingly, inconsistent responses to partner stalking—that may, in turn, have consequent risks to aggressor accountability or containment and victim safety—represent possible practical implications associated with this disconnect, though such concerns were not directly tested within the scope of this study. We are not advocating that partner stalking should or should not be emphasized within practice guidelines and, indeed, practice. Instead, we simply highlight that the current levels of practice-based understanding regarding partner stalking call into question the ability of IPV practitioners to adhere to the 'best practice' recommendations in practice guidelines.

In turn, two more implications may be relevant. For example, developing and delivering partner stalking-specific training for practitioners in the IPV sector could improve partner stalking literacy and support more consistent understandings of this phenomenon than currently exist (e.g., Maran et al., 2019). Such training could be based in part on this study's insights regarding the key sources of confusion. However, given the identified sources of confusion are mirrored in the research, such a recommendation may be premature and further theory development may be required first to better inform future training. The other option could involve revising IPV practice guidelines to ensure there is better alignment with current research regarding stalking in IPV cases, in turn, to better support practice.

Limitations and Future Research

In presenting the results of this study, the ways in which we presented our analysis may imply that practitioners held consistent views within their individual interviews and that groups of practitioners also held consistent views across interviews. Further, some themes almost suggested perspective ‘types’ existed, especially in relation to distinguishing between partner stalking and coercive control. Although this approach supported knowledge synthesis and clarity, in reality, most practitioners contradicted themselves to varying extents as they tried to make sense of partner stalking and the questions we asked. Qualitative research is a generative process in which the researchers play an active part in meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2021). But getting the balance right between a bottom-up approach and a partially top-down approach based on our knowledge of the research literature was a challenge in this study.

Other potential limitations include recruitment and sampling issues. Due to challenges with recruitment, the sample size was smaller than originally planned. Establishing engagement with agencies and recruiting individual participants was difficult, likely because of the under-resourced nature of these agencies and flow-on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. As a result, the data collection period and the potential participant pool were limited in scope. However, completed interviews yielded rich and complex data, so the size of this sample may be less limiting than it initially appears. Additionally, participating agencies and individual practitioners self-selected into this sample, so these findings may not represent the full diversity of perspectives on partner stalking within the sector (and it is worth additionally noting that no participants outside the IPV sector were included, so these findings cannot reflect the likely broader diversity in perspectives of stalking practitioners from across the mental health and forensic sectors). However, sampled IPV agencies varied based on their primary client type (e.g., aggressors,

victims) and cultural orientation (e.g., some Kaupapa Māori services included), and individual practitioners varied based on their socio-demographic details and length of service in the sector. While we did not identify any obvious differences based on these factors, future research with a larger sample size than the current study could explore whether such patterns exist.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored practice-based definitions of partner stalking among specialist IPV practitioners. The findings indicated that practitioners defined partner stalking as a multidimensional construct, with an explicit emphasis on specific types of behavior and an implicit emphasis on these behaviors being unwanted, repeated, monitoring-related, causing victim fear, and primarily occurring between a separated aggressor and victim. Although broadly consistent with key stalking research (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Fox et al., 2010), such ‘definitions’ are fundamentally just behavioral lists that do not involve the abstraction of a common or overarching understanding of partner stalking. Further, the findings demonstrated considerable heterogeneity in whether—and, if so, how—practitioners distinguished partner stalking from coercive control. As such, urgent theory development is required to guide how practitioners (and researchers) define and understand partner stalking in IPV cases, and the possible distinctions between partner stalking and other types of IPV, such as coercive control; ultimately, to support consistent and safe practice.

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Chapter 4: Study Three

Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Partner stalking as a possible risk factor for subsequent intimate partner violence reported to New Zealand Police. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Abstract

Given the high demands on police to respond to intimate partner violence (IPV), accurate risk assessment and triaging is important. And, ideally, empirical research will guide these processes. Focusing on risk factors for subsequent IPV is thus a relevant consideration for practitioners and researchers alike, with IPV practice guidelines emphasizing partner stalking as a key risk factor, especially for serious or lethal IPV. However, the evidence underpinning this claim remains surprisingly limited. Accordingly, we explored whether partner stalking predicted subsequent IPV outcomes reported to police. We analysed 1,126 cases of IPV reported to New Zealand Police and examined whether partner stalking predicted (a) any IPV recurrence or (b) physical IPV recurrence across a 12-month follow up. For each outcome, we examined whether partner stalking was predictive on its own, and then when controlling for other risk assessment information commonly used by police. Although partner stalking predicted any IPV recurrence (i.e., any IPV incident reported to police, irrespective of severity), it no longer predicted this outcome in the presence of other risk factors. Further, partner stalking did not predict physical IPV recurrence at all. While not a direct test of serious or lethal IPV prediction, this study provides valuable context about the possible links between partner stalking and subsequent IPV more generally. These findings suggest that partner stalking may not warrant special consideration for risk prediction of subsequent IPV—at least when measured by any IPV recurrence and physical IPV recurrence—and may co-occur with other, more commonly assessed risk factors; some of which are better predictors than partner stalking. Overall, these findings add to the limited body of empirical research that underpins partner stalking-specific claims in IPV practice guidelines to date. This disconnection between the evidence and guidelines is both practically and theoretically important and warrants further research consideration.

Keywords partner abuse; domestic abuse; risk factors; ecological model; coordinated community response

Partner Stalking as a Possible Risk Factor for Subsequent Intimate Partner Violence Reported to New Zealand Police

Approximately every three minutes, New Zealand Police (NZP) respond to a family violence-related call for service (New Zealand Police, 2022), the majority of which involve intimate partner violence (IPV⁹; Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021; Mossman et al., 2019). Given this high level of demand, it is important that police accurately assess the risk of subsequent IPV and, in turn, appropriately triage and allocate wider intervention resources. Such processes should be guided by empirical evidence, so focusing on individual risk factors—namely, variables that predict an increased likelihood of subsequent harmful or criminal behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2010)—remains an important consideration for researchers. One such *possible* risk factor is partner stalking. Partner stalking¹⁰ is commonly defined as an aggressor’s intentional pattern of repeated, unwanted behaviors towards a victim over time, which may cause the victim to feel fearful, threatened, or otherwise negatively impacted (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; McEwan et al., 2021). And types of stalking behavior typically include the aggressor following the victim, showing up places uninvited, harassing the victim’s family or friends, giving the victim unwanted items, making unwanted phone contact, and monitoring the victim’s online activity (Truman & Morgan, 2021). But, despite partner stalking being widely emphasized as an important IPV risk factor by practitioners and researchers alike (e.g., Dreke et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019), especially for serious or lethal IPV, surprisingly limited empirical evidence supports this assumption, as reviewed below. Accordingly, this study investigates whether partner stalking predicts subsequent IPV outcomes reported to police within a New Zealand practice context.

⁹ IPV refers to any psychological (e.g., verbal abuse, property damage, threats of harm, financial abuse), sexual or physical harm perpetrated towards a current or former intimate partner ([NZ] Family Violence Act, 2018).

¹⁰ Although perspectives differ on this issue within the research literature, partner stalking here refers to aggressors and victims who are in intact or separated intimate relationships.

IPV Practice Guidelines and Risk Assessment

Both internationally and in New Zealand, practice guidelines flag partner stalking as a key risk factor for predicting subsequent IPV, primarily that which is serious or even lethal (Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). Specifically, New Zealand guidelines claim that partner stalking is one of several “strong indicators of a victim being at increased risk of serious harm or homicide” (Ministry of Justice, 2017, p.30) and Australian guidelines claim that “there is significant evidence that the below risk factors indicate high risk of serious harm or death”, of which partner stalking is one of ten key risk factors presented (Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018, p. 12). To a lesser extent, some guidelines note partner stalking is linked to other subsequent IPV outcomes, such as violence (though it is unclear if this exclusively refers to physical violence or includes psychological violence, for example) and injury (e.g., Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). Additionally, United Kingdom guidelines use the intensity and frequency of specific partner stalking behaviors to determine three levels of overall risk for classifying an IPV case (SafeLives, 2015). Overall, these guidelines typically inform activities related to risk assessment and prediction, case management, and intervention delivery, but we focus exclusively on risk assessment and prediction in this study.

Despite this emphasis on partner stalking in practice guidelines, an interesting divergence exists between these guidelines and the risk assessment instruments commonly used in police practice to predict various IPV recurrence outcomes. A stalking item is absent from most instruments. For example, the Brief Spousal Assault Form for the Evaluation of Risk (B-SAFER; Kropp et al., 2010, as cited in Storey et al., 2014), the Dynamic Risk Assessment (DYRA; New Zealand Police, n.d.a.; New Zealand Police, n.d.b.), the Static Assessment of Family Violence Recidivism (SAFVR; New Zealand Police, n.d.a.; New Zealand Police, n.d.b.), the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment guide (SARA; Kropp et al.,

1996, as cited in Jung et al., 2022), and the Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA; Hilton et al., 2004) do not contain a stalking item. In contrast, the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour based violence risk assessment (DASH; Richards, 2009) and the Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT; Ringland, 2018) do contain a stalking item.

How guidelines influence practitioners' risk assessments remains largely unclear. These guidelines often assign a special risk factor status to partner stalking, calling it a *high-risk factor* (Ministry of Justice, 2017; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018) but not specifying the meaning of this term. Thus, this term could imply that, compared to other risk factors, partner stalking carries a unique and heightened risk of subsequent IPV, especially for serious IPV-related harm and lethality. In turn, an implied recommendation may be that practitioners should assign more weight to partner stalking than other factors in risk assessments, or even that partner stalking represents an override factor for practitioners to automatically categorize all IPV cases involving partner stalking as high risk, irrespective of the partner stalking severity level or the results of the risk assessment instrument they may be using. Of note, these guidelines do not directly account for how partner stalking relates to other subsequent IPV outcomes, such as any IPV recurrence (i.e., irrespective of severity level) or any physical IPV recurrence, but arguably this consideration is highly relevant for overall assessment, triage, and resource allocation purposes

Prediction Research

Furthermore, the emphasis in practice guidelines on partner stalking as a risk factor for subsequent (primarily serious or lethal) IPV remains poorly evidenced. Although meta-analytic findings based on cross-sectional studies demonstrated partner stalking commonly co-occurs with other types of IPV (Love et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2022), findings from longitudinal prediction research are less convincing. Below, we review studies that used prior

partner stalking to predict three subsequent outcomes: partner homicide, IPV recurrence involving any physical violence, and any IPV recurrence.

Partner Homicide

A recent meta-analysis showed partner stalking positively predicted partner homicide (Spencer & Stith, 2020). But these findings were only based on four studies, three of which were (fully or partially) drawn from the same sample (Campbell et al., 2003; Koziol-McLain et al., 2006; McFarlane et al., 2002a, 2002b). And partner stalking did not uniquely predict partner homicide after controlling for myriad other risk factors (Campbell et al., 2003). Other influential grey literature publications (e.g., Monckton Smith et al., 2017) have emphasized links between partner stalking and partner homicide. However, Sheed and colleagues' (2024) critique of this literature is highly relevant to interpreting such findings; and additional research that prospectively assesses how many partner stalking cases result in partner homicide, especially considering estimates of how commonly partner stalking occurs in IPV cases¹¹, are thus still required to better evidence guidelines' claims about the link between partner stalking and later partner homicide.

Any Physical IPV Recurrence

Practice guidelines also emphasized partner stalking as an important risk factor for predicting serious IPV-related harm. Although this outcome would be best operationalized as severe physical IPV, several of the available empirical studies to date examined any level of physical IPV recurrence. Even when no other variables were controlled for, most studies found partner stalking did not predict any physical IPV recurrence (Almond et al., 2017; Gerbrandij et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2022). One study identified a significant, negative relationship (Ringland, 2018) and another, a significant, positive relationship (Sonis & Langer, 2008). Based on multivariate analyses—that is, using various types and combinations

¹¹ McEwan et al. (2017) estimated that over 50% of IPV victims also experience stalking by the same aggressor.

of risk factors including partner stalking—most studies found partner stalking did not uniquely predict any physical IPV recurrence (Jung et al., 2022; Ringland, 2018; Sonis & Langer, 2008). Therefore, overall, this research tends to suggest that partner stalking does not predict subsequent physical IPV overall, whether on its own, or when analysed together with other risk factors.

Any IPV Recurrence

Finally, some prior studies have examined whether partner stalking predicts any type of IPV recurrence, regardless of type or severity. Prior studies measured any IPV recurrence using police-reported IPV incidents (Ringland, 2018) or IPV offence data (Almond et al., 2017). Without any competition from other potential predictors, partner stalking did not significantly predict any IPV recurrence in either of these studies. Further, partner stalking did not uniquely predict any IPV recurrence when controlling for other DVSA items (Ringland, 2018). Together, this research indicated that partner stalking did not predict any IPV recurrence overall, regardless of IPV severity.

Key Conclusions

To summarize the existing research, it appears that while previous stalking is disproportionately present in partner homicide cases, prediction studies show stalking tends not to predict subsequent IPV outcomes in most studies, whether as a sole predictor or in the company of other potential predictor variables. But it is difficult to be confident about such a conclusion because of the relatively small number of studies overall, and the variability in study designs. For example, measurement of partner stalking varied: some studies only required a single instance of partner stalking behaviour (e.g., Monckton Smith et al., 2017) or a police-rated partner stalking item from a risk assessment instrument (e.g., Almond et al., 2017; Ringland, 2018), whereas other studies used legal definitions or required a repeated pattern of unwanted behavior, with behavioral items taken from relevant scales or surveys

(e.g., Gerbrandij et al., 2018; McFarlane et al., 1999; Sonis & Langer, 2008). Second, measurement of IPV recurrence varied. For example, physical IPV recurrence was measured from police-recorded incidents (Ringland, 2018), police-recorded offences or charges (Almond et al., 2017; Gerbrandij et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2022) and victim self-reports (Sonis & Langer, 2008). And third, follow-up periods also varied, from 12 months (e.g., Almond et al., 2017; Ringland, 2018) up to five years (Jung et al., 2022). Accordingly, some discrepancies appear to exist between IPV practice guidelines, typical risk assessment instruments used by police, and findings from this prediction research.

Current Study

Given the small number of studies overall, and the variations in methodology noted above, further investigation of the role of partner stalking in the prediction of IPV recurrence outcomes is clearly warranted. Further, although not discussed earlier, jurisdictions vary in their legislative frameworks, policing practices, and service responses for IPV and partner stalking, supporting the importance of research across a broad range of legal and criminal justice settings. In New Zealand, one national police service exists, responding to IPV and non-IPV family represent a key strategic policy of NZP (New Zealand Police, 2022), and extensive public education campaigns have strongly encouraged people experiencing IPV to engage with police, irrespective of whether such behaviours are criminal. As such, a considerable proportion of incidents reported to NZP do not involve the detection of an offence, and often involve verbal harm only (Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021; Tomkins, 2020). To examine the potential link between partner stalking and subsequent IPV outcomes¹² in this practice context, we asked the following research question: does prior partner stalking predict any IPV recurrence, or physical IPV recurrence reported to police across a 12-month follow

¹² Our sample did not include any cases of partner homicide, so we could not directly test whether partner stalking predicted this outcome.

up, (a) on its own and (b) when controlling for other risk assessment information commonly used by police?

Method

We used a pseudo-prospective, longitudinal cohort design based on archival data. This study—which used the same dataset as, and extended work by, Tomkins et al (2023)—had ethical approval from the University of Waikato and was approved by the Integrated Safety Response (ISR) national governance board.

Baseline Data Collection and Predictor Variables

Data collection processes for the initial sample ($N = 1,150$) are detailed by Tomkins et al. (2023). To briefly summarise, we sampled all unique cases with at least one IPV incident reported to New Zealand Police (NZP) in the Christchurch and Waikato areas¹³ between 1 November and 31 December 2018. We then examined all subsequent IPV incidents reported across a 6-month baseline period (i.e., from each case’s first sampled incident date until the corresponding date between 01 May and 30 June 2019; we did not analyze any IPV incidents reported outside of this period, nor use any supplementary information attached to the NZP case files, such as victim statements). Data from the first sampled incident report and any additional incidents that occurred during this six-month baseline period—as reviewed and analysed in Tomkins et al (2023)—informed the three predictor variables described below.

Baseline Partner Stalking

We manually coded this dichotomous variable based on police-documented free text in baseline incident reports indicating the presence of partner stalking (1 = stalking, 0 = no stalking). We used the following definition of stalking, derived from previous research.

Stalking was coded as “1” (i.e., as present) if the following three criteria were met:

¹³ In these areas, NZP referred all reported IPV incidents to the ISR (Mossman et al., 2017), which comprises of representatives from government (e.g., NZP, Department of Corrections, Ministry of Justice, child protection services) and non-government agencies (e.g., specialist family violence services). NZP and ISR practitioners collaborate on tasks relating to risk assessment, case management, and interventions (Mossman et al., 2019).

1. the aggressor followed the victim; snuck into their home, car or similar; waited for the victim at their home, workplace or similar; showed up or drove by the victim's home, workplace or similar; left gifts or other unwanted items; called or texted the victim; tracked the victim's whereabouts; posted (or threatened to post) personal information about the victim online; *or* sent the victim messages online (as per the United States National Crime Victimization Survey's Supplemental Victimization Survey on stalking; Truman & Morgan, 2020);
2. the aggressor repeated one such type of behavior two or more times, or perpetrated two or more different types of these behaviors; *and*
3. these behaviors were unwanted by the victim. This latter criterion (i.e., unwanted) required that, at the time these behaviors were perpetrated: the aggressor and victim were separated, *or* an order was in place to prevent contact between the aggressor and victim, irrespective of relationship status., *or* the victim reported the incident to NZP themselves, irrespective of relationship status.

Baseline Risk Level

We noted the overall risk level—low, medium or high—recorded in each case's most recent baseline incident. This variable represented the most up-to-date police-based assessment of risk and is automatically calculated by combining the results of the two family violence risk assessment instruments used by NZP: the SAFVR and DYRA (New Zealand Police, n.d.a.; New Zealand Police, n.d.b.). We describe the SAFVR and DYRA in more detail below. Both estimate the likelihood of subsequent IPV and are used to determine the level of intervention required by police and wider support services (Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021); although there are mixed findings regarding the psychometric properties of these instruments (Bissielo & Knight, 2016, as cited in Jolliffe Simpson, 2023; Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021). Recall that neither the SAFVR nor the DYRA contained a stalking item.

First, the SAFVR is a statistical estimate of the likelihood of an aggressor committing a family violence offence within the following two years, based on eight aggressor-specific variables such as their age, gender, and officially recorded historical offending-related data from NZP and the Ministry of Justice (New Zealand Police, n.d.a., n.d.b.). Second, the DYRA is designed to assess imminent risk, to guide short-term police responses following an incident (i.e., within the subsequent three days; Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021). Attending officers complete the DYRA, usually at the scene of the incident and primarily by asking the victim about the aggressor's recent harmful behaviors and stressors. The DYRA contains up to 16 items: 10 items for all types of family violence, two items specific to IPV, and four items if children reside with the aggressor or victim (New Zealand Police, n.d.a.). Items examine the presence of jealousy and control, noncompliance with orders, mental health issues, strangulation and so on, although the full list is not publicly available.

Multiple Baseline Incidents

We dichotomously recorded whether cases had more than one IPV incident reported during the baseline period (1 = multiple baseline incidents, 0 = one baseline incident).

Follow-up Data Collection and Recurrence Variables

In the current study, we examined all subsequent IPV incidents reported across the ensuing 12-month follow-up period only (i.e., from each case's baseline period end date until the corresponding date between 01 May and 30 June 2020¹⁴). We removed a small number of cases where records about follow-up incidents were 'locked for security reasons' in the ISR database ($n = 21$). Cases can be locked due to their high-profile nature or because of a partner homicide, though there were no homicides in our sample (N. Blake, personal communication, August 13, 2024). We also removed cases if all risk information was missing ($n = 3$; i.e., no

¹⁴ Again, we did not analyze any IPV incidents reported outside of this period, nor use any supplementary information attached to the NZP case files.

SAFVR or DYRA classification available across any baseline incidents) because this meant no total level of concern for safety classification information was available. We only examined incidents where police identified aggressors and victims in the same roles as in baseline incidents¹⁵. Thus, we retained a sample of 1,126 cases with complete baseline and follow-up data. Data from follow-up incident reports informed the following two outcome variables.

Any IPV Recurrence

We dichotomously recorded any IPV recurrence (1 = any IPV recurrence, 0 = no IPV recurrence). This variable captured whether any further IPV incidents were reported to NZP for each case during the 12-month follow up, irrespective of whether such incidents resulted in offence detection, arrest, or charges laid by police. We also recorded the total number of recurrences.

Physical IPV Recurrence

We dichotomously recorded physical IPV recurrence (1 = physical IPV recurrence, 0 = no physical IPV recurrence). This variable captured whether police detected *any* level or type of physical violence in any IPV recurrence incident reported for each case during the 12-month follow up¹⁶; again, irrespective of whether such incidents resulted in offence detection, arrest, or charges laid by police. Of note, rather than being based on information recorded by police in the narrative section of the incident report or on violence-specific charges, this variable was taken from a tick-box completed by attending officers that simply indicated the presence or absence of any kind of physical IPV in that incident. We recorded the total number of follow-up incidents in which physical IPV was present.

¹⁵ The label aggressors represented the police-identified roles of ‘Perpetrator’, ‘Suspect’, and ‘Person Posing Risk’ if both parties were labelled ‘Mutual Participant’. The label victim represented the police-identified roles of ‘Victim’, ‘Primary Victim’, and ‘Person at Risk’ if both parties were labelled ‘Mutual Participant’.

¹⁶ In some cases, the incident meeting the criteria for physical IPV recurrence was not the first incident in that dyad’s follow-up period and, therefore, not the same event as recorded for any IPV recurrence.

Sample Characteristics

Most aggressors were men ($n = 940$, 83.5%) and most victims were women ($n = 948$, 84.2%). The average age of aggressors was 35.3 years ($SD = 11.4$ years), and 33.5 years ($SD = 11.4$ years) for victims. Aggressors' and victims' ethnicities were commonly recorded by NZP as European ($n_{agg} = 534$, 47.4%; $n_{vic} = 538$, 47.8) or Māori ($n_{agg} = 467$, 41.5%; $n_{vic} = 435$, 38.6%); and less commonly, as 'Other Ethnicity' ($n_{agg} = 54$, 4.8%; $n_{vic} = 91$, 8.1%), Pasifika ($n_{agg} = 38$, 3.4%; $n_{vic} = 34$, 3.0%), Asian ($n_{agg} = 30$, 2.7%; $n_{vic} = 25$, 2.2%), African ($n_{agg} = 1$; $n_{vic} = 3$), Latin American ($n_{agg} = 2$; $n_{vic} = 0$). Cases were predominantly classified by NZP as high risk ($n = 708$, 62.9%) and, to a lesser extent, low ($n = 236$, 21.0%) or moderate ($n = 182$, 16.2%) risk. Almost half the sampled cases had multiple baseline incidents reported ($n = 456$, 40.5%) and the number of baseline incidents ranged from one to 23 incidents ($M = 1.9$ incidents).

Analytical Approach

Having assembled a database for analysis containing all the above variables, we conducted analyses in IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. We used descriptive statistics to summarize the prevalence of recurrence. We then confirmed the required statistical assumptions were met (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) and conducted Binary Logistic Regressions to predict any IPV recurrence and physical IPV recurrence, respectively, using baseline partner stalking (a) on its own and (b) alongside the overall baseline risk level and multiple baseline incidents variable. We included these two covariates because the former represented a key component in NZP's risk assessment, decision-making and responses for each case; and for the latter, we expected cases involving multiple prior recurrences within a short timeframe (i.e., during the baseline period) to be more likely to involve subsequent incidents in the future (i.e., during follow up). Further, we selected low risk as the reference category for baseline risk level because moderate- and high-risk cases were most alike in

terms of the typical ISR intervention levels offered after a reported incident (Mossman et al., 2019).

Results

Baseline partner stalking was present in 14.1% ($n = 159$) of cases. Focusing on the specific types of partner stalking behavior recorded, the aggressor showed up or drove by the victim's home, workplace or similar such location in 19.2% ($n = 216$) of cases and made unwanted phone contact with the victim in 10.8% ($n = 122$) of cases. Other types of stalking behavior were less frequently recorded (followed $n = 38$; 3.4%; forced/covert entry $n = 58$, 5.2%; waited $n = 9$, 0.8%; inappropriate gifts $n = 10$, 0.9%; location tracking $n = 5$, 0.4%; reputation damage $n = 28$, 2.5%; unwanted cyber contact $n = 26$, 2.3%). Overall, the number of different types of partner stalking behavior identified in cases ranged from zero to five.

Of the sampled cases, 38.4% ($n = 432$) had at least one IPV recurrence incident reported during the follow-up period. The overall IPV recurrence count ranged from zero to 34 incidents ($M = 1.2$ incidents). Further, 17.7% ($n = 199$) of cases had at least one physical IPV recurrence incident (i.e., involving physical violence of any severity level) reported during the follow-up period. The physical IPV recurrence count ranged from zero to seven incidents ($M = 0.3$ incidents).

As detailed in Table 1, we estimated two hierarchical binary logistic regression models, which predicted any IPV recurrence (see Model 1) and physical IPV recurrence (see Model 2). Although Model 1a—with partner stalking as the sole predictor—was statistically significant overall and stalking significantly predicted increased odds of any IPV recurrence, the Pseudo R^2 estimate suggested a very poor fit. On the other hand, Model 1b—with partner stalking and the two covariates as predictors—was significant overall and the Pseudo R^2 estimate suggested a better fit than for partner stalking alone. However, partner stalking did not uniquely predict any IPV recurrence. On the other hand, baseline risk level was a

significant predictor (i.e., compared to low-risk cases, medium- and high-risk cases were each uniquely associated with increased odds of any IPV recurrence), as was having multiple baseline incidents (i.e., compared to cases with only one reported baseline incidents, having multiple baseline incidents was uniquely associated with increased odds of any IPV recurrence).

Next, Model 2a—with partner stalking as the sole predictor for physical IPV recurrence—was statistically nonsignificant overall, partner stalking was a non-significant predictor, and the Pseudo R^2 estimate again suggested a very poor fit. Model 2b was significant overall and the Pseudo R^2 estimate suggested a better fit than for partner stalking alone. But partner stalking did not uniquely predict physical IPV recurrence; like Model 1b, only risk level and the presence of multiple baseline incidents uniquely predicted this outcome.

Table 1. Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting Any Recurrence (Model 1) and Physical Recurrence (Model 2)

Variable	Model 1					Model 2				
	B	SE	Wald χ^2	<i>p</i>	OR [95% CI]	B	SE	Wald χ^2	<i>p</i>	OR [95% CI]
<i>Step 1</i> ^a										
Baseline stalking	0.39	0.17	5.19	.023	1.48 [1.06-2.08]	0.15	0.22	0.47	.495	1.16 [0.76-1.77]
Constant	-0.53	0.07	63.64	< .001	0.59	-1.57	0.09	339.08	< .001	0.21
<i>Step 2</i> ^b										
Baseline stalking	-0.14	0.19	0.54	.465	0.87 [0.60-1.26]	-0.34	0.23	2.20	.138	0.71 [0.45-1.12]
Baseline risk level*			20.05	< .001				13.79	.001	
Medium	0.92	0.23	15.94	< .001	2.50 [1.60-3.93]	1.06	0.33	10.34	.001	2.90 [1.52-5.54]
High	0.79	0.19	17.25	< .001	2.19 [1.51-3.18]	1.06	0.29	13.41	< .001	2.90 [1.64-5.12]
Multiple baseline episodes	1.25	0.14	83.26	< .001	3.48 [2.66-4.55]	1.09	0.17	40.62	< .001	2.97 [2.13-4.15]
Constant	-1.67	0.17	94.77	< .001	0.19	-2.95	0.28	114.92	< .001	0.05

Note. * Reference category = Low risk. Pseudo R^2 is Nagelkerke.

^a Any recurrence Pseudo $R^2 = .01$, $\chi^2(1) = 5.14$, $p = .023$

^b Any recurrence Pseudo $R^2 = .15$, $\chi^2(4) = 134.89$, $p < .001$

^a Physical recurrence Pseudo $R^2 = .00$, $\chi^2(1) = 0.46$, $p = .499$

^b Physical recurrence Pseudo $R^2 = .10$, $\chi^2(4) = 73.36$, $p < .001$

Discussion

Overall, this study focussed on partner stalking, risk prediction, and subsequent IPV in a New Zealand policing practice setting. We examined whether partner stalking during a six-month baseline period predicted two types of IPV recurrence reported to police over a 12-month follow up. Our findings provided limited evidence that partner stalking was a risk factor for any IPV recurrence and consistent evidence that stalking did not predict any physical IPV recurrence.

Although partner stalking predicted any IPV recurrence, it failed to uniquely predict this outcome when controlling for other risk factors (namely, baseline risk level and the presence of multiple baseline incidents). Finding that partner stalking predicted any recurrence of IPV was inconsistent with the findings of Almond et al. (2017) and Ringland (2018); when partner stalking was used on its own as a predictor, these studies found it did not predict any IPV recurrence. But once controlling for IPV risk assessment information in multivariate analyses, our results were consistent with Ringland (2018), who found that partner stalking did not uniquely predict any IPV recurrence. Further, partner stalking did not predict physical IPV recurrence in any of our analyses. Most previous findings aligned with the current study, across both bivariate (e.g., Almond et al., 2017; Gerbrandij et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2022) and multivariate analyses (e.g., Jung et al., 2022; Ringland, 2018; Sonis & Langer, 2008). Thus, the overall pattern across the current and previous research suggests that partner stalking does not predict any physical IPV recurrence. Taking these previous results together with our own, the pattern signals, at best, a somewhat complicated risk prediction picture for partner stalking and subsequent IPV.

There are several possible explanations for this study's findings. Given that partner stalking, by itself, predicted any IPV recurrence but not physical IPV recurrence, aggressors who perpetrate partner stalking may simply be more likely than non-stalking aggressors to

commit subsequent (reported) IPV, irrespective of the severity level. Recurrence in IPV cases with partner stalking may typically be lower risk than what practice guidelines suggest. In New Zealand over the last 10 to 15 years, government policies aimed at seriously reducing the harm resulting from IPV and non-IPV family violence have promoted a lower threshold for calling police to incidents, alongside revised legislation that improved guidance for IPV practitioners (Te Puna Aonui, 2024). As a result, a considerable proportion of the incidents that make up the ‘any IPV recurrence’ variable typically do not include criminal behavior, with a majority involving only verbally expressed harm (Jolliffe Simpson et al., 2021; Tomkins, 2020). We are aware that this less conservative approach to contacting police is not typical of many other jurisdictions internationally. So, these findings could represent victim adherence to safety planning and support from practitioners around the importance of evidencing any level of ongoing contact or harm after partner stalking victimization (Dreke et al., 2020).

While not a direct test of the serious or lethal IPV prediction emphasized in IPV practice guidelines, this study’s findings suggest that stalking is not uncommon and, at best, co-occurs with other, more commonly assessed factors in risk prediction instruments that are better predictors of recurrence, whether in general or for physical violence specifically. Statistically, the absence of a stalking item in risk assessment instruments appears not to matter in determining the overall risk of recurrence. Instead, other items in NZP’s risk assessment instruments and general information about the frequency of an aggressor’s recent abusive behavior (i.e., the presence of multiple baseline incidents) appears to be more useful for risk prediction than whether aggressors engaged in specific forms of IPV, such as partner stalking.

Practical Implications

We now consider the implications of this study for IPV-related practice. Although it remains unclear how directly practice guidelines influence police or multi-agency practice, our findings (alongside the overall patterns across previous research) appear to diminish the broader importance placed on partner stalking within practice guidelines as an indicator of the future risk of harm¹⁷. This is noteworthy, given there are several important ramifications if police and other IPV practitioners overclassify a case's risk based on the presence of partner stalking as a 'high-risk factor'. If practitioners assign more weight to partner stalking than other factors in risk assessments or automatically categorize all IPV cases with partner stalking as high risk, irrespective of the other combinations of (other) risk factors present, then—based on the current and previous findings—the result will be a high rate of false positive predictions in the high-risk category. In other words, only a small proportion of IPV cases with partner stalking that are flagged as high risk would actually lead to subsequent IPV. Such a practice would likely result in diverting supporting and resources away from where it is most needed; a concern that is particularly relevant and problematic when considering the already intense IPV-related demands on limited police resources (New Zealand Police, 2022).

Our findings also have implications for whether partner stalking should be an item in instruments used to establish risk levels for triage or intervention. Recall that most instruments (e.g., the B-SAFER, DYRA, ODARA, SAFVR and SARA) do not contain a partner stalking-specific item. Although including partner stalking as an item might improve rates of partner stalking detection (Tomkins et al., 2023), and despite the emphasis on partner stalking in practice guidelines, current and previous findings (e.g., Jung et al., 2022) suggest

¹⁷ While we note that risk assessments also inform other practical activities, such as case management and intervention delivery (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), these considerations remain outside the scope of this study.

that including partner stalking as an additional, separate item in the ongoing refinement of IPV risk assessments would not enhance risk prediction accuracy.

However, we also note that finding partner stalking does not appear to have “special” status as a risk factor for IPV recurrence reported to police in New Zealand doesn’t have any immediate implications for reporting of partner stalking, or how practitioners intervene with stalking aggressors and victims. Partner stalking, by definition, remains a type of harm and warrants the same care and attention from practitioners as other types of IPV. As such, this study does not yield implications related to treatment or case management.

Limitations and Future Research

An overall caveat for this study related to the inability of our measures to account for IPV severity, particularly the serious and lethal outcomes emphasized in practice guidelines. While we were interested in the apparent disconnection between practice guidelines and evidence, we could not directly test the relationship between partner stalking and serious harm or lethality within the confines of the current study. And instead of manually coding the severity of physical IPV recurrence based on validated measures like the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale using the narrative section of police incident reports (e.g., Bendlin & Sheridan, 2019), our physical IPV recurrence outcome measure was based on a summary-level categorization by police. As such, we could not describe the range in physical IPV recurrence severity observed in this sample and, thus, could not account for severity in our analyses. Instead, our measure likely captured low level physical violence (e.g., pushing) through to very serious and dangerous behavior (e.g., strangulation, physical assault with weapon). As a result, the current study cannot directly assess the claims made in practice guidelines about the importance of stalking in the prediction of the most severe forms of subsequent IPV. Prediction of very low base-rate events, such as partner homicides from among a high frequency pool of less severe incidents, is, at best, a statistically challenging aspiration. But

conversely, elevating the status of one type of IPV in the prospective prediction of recurrence, when that elevation is based on studies often sampling on the dependent variable, is problematic because it is likely to inflate the apparent relationship.

Inconsistencies in police recording of partner stalking information may have also affected our findings. Unlike for other types of IPV-related harm (e.g., physical violence, property damage, strangulation), neither the NZP database nor the risk assessment instruments they used when responding to the incidents included in this research systematically directed police attention towards partner stalking. As such, the circumstances prompting attending officers to record partner stalking (or even ask about it) remain unclear and may have resulted in underreporting of partner stalking behaviors. Although this problem is typical of all research drawing on field data, the findings may have been different if police systematically asked about and recorded partner stalking in their practice.

Another limitation of this study relates to unexamined covariates during the follow-up period, particularly regarding intervention delivery. Medium- and high-risk cases are prioritized for intervention (Mossman et al., 2019). However, we could not meaningfully describe or analyse aggressors' or victims' actual engagement with IPV-related interventions, which could logically influence the relationship between predictor and outcome variables. This information was not recorded in police incident reports and was unreliably recorded in the ISR database; although a considerable proportions of aggressors and victims may not engage with the offered ISR interventions, meaning that the actual impact of any effective intervention is likely to be small overall (see Mossman et al., 2019; Tomkins, 2020).

A final limitation of this study relates to the lack of detail available in the risk-related information used, which meant that we could not directly compare partner stalking to individual items in the NZP risk instruments (e.g., jealousy and control, noncompliance with orders, mental health issues). Previous studies have used a mixture of total scores (e.g., Jung

et al., 2022) or individual items (e.g., Ringland, 2018) from risk instruments but this level of information about the SAFVR and DYRA is not publicly available and so could not be used in our research. Ideally, researchers could analyse individual items from risk assessment instruments alongside partner stalking in future studies, to compare each variable's predictive accuracy for various IPV recurrence outcomes and identify any statistical overlaps between risk factors (although it is worth noting that such research would likely require repeated measures over time to ensure an acceptable level of measurement reliability). Such research could highlight which specific items are more relevant than partner stalking to IPV risk prediction to better inform guidelines; as well as well as providing theoretically relevant information about the possible conceptual overlaps between partner stalking and other forms of IPV.

Future research could examine a wider range of predictor variables. For example, researchers could add more detail to the stalking variable. Instead of the dichotomous partner stalking variable used in both the current and previous studies (e.g., Jung et al., 2022; Ringland, 2018), measures that capture the severity of partner stalking would be valuable. Such measures could consider partner stalking frequency, intensity, and intrusiveness; and would better account for the heterogenous nature of partner stalking, raising the possibility of improving the discrimination of potential relationships between more severe partner stalking and the most severe forms of IPV recurrence. Further, and in keeping with our question of whether partner stalking deserves to be 'called out' for its importance in predicting severe or lethal IPV, it would be valuable to include other predictors that international research has suggested are also predictive of lethality, when fatal and non-fatal cases are compared: including easy access to firearms, previous rape of the victim, previous threats with a weapon, and so on (e.g., Spencer & Stith, 2020).

Future research could also examine other outcome variables. It would be valuable to examine partner stalking recurrence and, with reference to practice guidelines, IPV recurrence severity. Such research would likely require relatively labour-intensive manual coding (e.g., Bendlin & Sheridan, 2019) or computational text mining of narratives (see Neubauer et al., 2023) but would advance the current state of knowledge about the nature of subsequent IPV and partner stalking. And to support partner stalking-related knowledge synthesis, it is important that future research adheres to principles of effective measurement (as much as is feasible given the constraints of the given study) when operationalizing partner stalking as a key predictor variable of interest (see Fox et al., 2011; McEwan et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, and consistent with most previous research, the current study demonstrated—with one exception—that partner stalking *did not* predict IPV recurrence outcomes reported to NZP. While not a direct test of the serious or lethal IPV risk prediction-related claims made in current practice guidelines (Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018), this study showed that, for the most part, identifying partner stalking in baseline episodes of IPV did not increase the accuracy of risk assessment of IPV recurrence or physical IPV recurrence, over and above existing NZP risk assessment instruments that do not contain a partner stalking item. Such findings question the view that partner stalking warrants extra attention—or even should be grounds for overriding to high risk an otherwise lower risk level assessment result. In a field where the overall number of empirical studies remains relatively small, the current study represents a valuable building block towards ensuring that practice guidelines relating to partner stalking risk assessment, IPV risk prediction, and triaging of IPV cases police are evidence based, but this is also clearly a practice area that warrants further research to support it.

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Chapter 5: General Discussion

In this thesis, we focused on the frontline IPV practice context—with practitioners from both NZP and specialist IPV agencies—to consider issues related to partner stalking definitions and identification, as well as partner stalking-related risk prediction. Such analysis contributes to an almost non-existent evidence base about partner stalking in New Zealand and provides theoretically relevant building blocks towards addressing some of the confusion that persists in the IPV and partner stalking research literature internationally. We used a combination of quantitative police data and qualitative interview data to achieve two primary aims of exploring (a) how practitioners identify and define partner stalking in cases of IPV and (b) whether partner stalking represents a risk factor for ongoing IPV. To provide additional context around these aims, we investigated multiple research questions across the three empirical studies presented in chapters two to four. In this final chapter, we summarise key findings from these studies, synthesise the overarching theoretical and practical implications, consider some additional strengths and limitations of this thesis, propose ideas for future research, and draw our final conclusions.

Key Findings

Identifying Partner Stalking

In study one, we identified partner stalking in 13.8%—or approximately one in every seven—IPV cases reported to NZP, using a commonly agreed upon measure of stalking taken from a national level crime survey from the United States (Truman & Morgan, 2021). Unlike with other IPV behaviours (e.g., physical violence, verbal abuse, strangulation, threats), no specific prompts guided NZP officers in whether to gather, or how to record, information about partner stalking during reported episodes. So, even if these figures represent a potentially conservative estimate of partner stalking prevalence, they indicate that partner stalking is a common problem in IPV cases reported to NZP. And given many other

jurisdictions have established stalking legislation that—at least in principle—prompts police to identify and record partner stalking, it was somewhat surprising that the rates of partner stalking in IPV cases were similar across both this study and previous non-New Zealand studies (Garza et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2009; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). This consensus suggests that partner stalking is documented at similar rates by police officers, regardless of local legislation and policies.

Partner stalking identification appeared to be an issue for practitioners, given few attending officers explicitly used the term ‘stalking’. Based on the information recorded in episode reports, police only used this term in 8.2%—or approximately one in every twelve—of cases that met the criteria for partner stalking. Prior research has demonstrated a similar discrepancy between researcher-labelled and police-labelled partner stalking (Brady et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), as well as broader issues around police miscategorising partner stalking incidents as lower tariff offence types (Brady & Nobles, 2017; HMIC, 2017; Jordan et al., 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Woodroof, 2010).

Defining Partner Stalking

Next, we examined different types of evidence relating to definitions of partner stalking in IPV cases. In the first study, we used a top-down approach to defining and measuring partner stalking but, of note, specified multiple different criteria for measuring partner stalking. Accordingly, this approach highlighted how different ways of operationalising partner stalking, such as including or excluding the victim fear requirement, yielded considerably different prevalence estimates using the same dataset.

In comparison, we used a bottom-up approach to explore practice-based definitions of partner stalking in study two, drawing on interviews with specialist IPV practitioners. Primarily, practitioners defined partner stalking by simply listing the key types of behaviours that they perceived as characterising partner stalking. These behaviours included the

aggressor following the victim; showing up at the victim's house, work, or other location without a legitimate reason; forcing entry onto the victim's property; involving third parties (e.g., to follow or gain information about the victim); and technology-facilitated behaviours (e.g., GPS tracking, hacking into the victim's accounts, using spyware, or monitoring the victim's social media). Prior research has similarly shown criminal justice and social service practitioners often define partner stalking with a behavioural emphasis (Villacampa & Salat, 2019).

To a lesser extent, practitioners referenced other factors that we interpreted as implicitly shaping their definitions of partner stalking. We considered such factors implicitly related to practitioners' definitions of partner stalking because they were not mentioned directly in response to being asked to define partner stalking, but still appeared to inform how the practitioners decided that partner stalking was occurring. Examples included whether behaviours were unwanted by the victim, served a surveillance and monitoring-related function for the aggressor, were repeated over time, and caused the victim fear. Thus, practitioners' definitions of partner stalking were primarily behavioural but, at least implicitly, also incorporated the multiple definitional factors often cited by stalking researchers generally (i.e., unwanted, repeated, and victim fear or negative impact; Fox et al., 2010; McEwan et al., 2021; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Overall, both practice- and research-based definitions of stalking appear to typically focus on behaviours, rather than summarise what makes stalking 'stalking', as compared to other types of harm.

Additionally, studies one and two yielded valuable insights regarding the relevance of the aggressor's and victim's relationship phase to defining partner stalking. Findings from study one revealed that partner stalking—at least in IPV cases reported to police—was rarely documented within intact relationships but was frequently documented across on-off *and* separated relationships. These latter two relationship phase categories accounted for over

90% of all partner stalking cases we identified in study one. Findings from study two indicated that although practitioners varied in their explicit assertions regarding the relevance of relationship phase for defining partner stalking, they almost exclusively emphasised ex-partners when describing a real-life partner stalking case. Taken together, these findings lend support to the idea that relationship breakdown and separation are important criteria for defining partner stalking in IPV cases (McEwan, Shea et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021); and that partner stalking represents a phenomenon that primarily—though perhaps not exclusively—occurs between ex-partners. This descriptive focus on relationship phase, and our provision of evidence about the extent to which practitioners perceive partner stalking as a phenomenon that occurs outside of relationships, was recommended as an important research endeavour by McEwan and colleagues (2021) to advance knowledge about the relevance of relationship phase in definitions of partner stalking.

A final consideration for defining partner stalking involved examining whether and, if so, how practitioners distinguished partner stalking from coercive control. Findings from study two showed that practitioners' perspectives varied but, took three main forms overall, with similar patterns mirrored in the literature review. Practitioners sometimes defined partner stalking as a type of coercive control, rather than as a distinct construct. Similarly, some researchers position partner stalking as a subtype of coercive control (e.g., Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Hilton et al., 2023; Stark, 2007). In other words, partner stalking was not perceived as a phenomenon distinct from coercive control in this approach.

Alternatively, practitioners sometimes defined partner stalking as distinct from coercive control but used two different approaches to govern how they made this distinction. One such approach used relationship phase, whereby practitioners defined partner stalking as a phenomenon that occurs in separated relationships and coercive control as a phenomenon that occurs in intact relationships. Similarly, some researchers position partner stalking as

distinct from IPV overall, based on whether the behaviours occur when the aggressor and victim are in an intact or separated relationship phase (e.g., Ferreira & Matos, 2013; McEwan, Shea et al., 2017; Senkans et al., 2021). The other approach used behaviour types, whereby practitioners defined partner stalking based on the presence of specific types of behaviour (i.e., the aggressor following the victim, forcing entry onto the victim's property, hacking into the victim's accounts, using GPS tracking, and so on). Further, these practitioners defined coercive control based on the presence of specific types of behaviour (i.e., involving the aggressor using put downs, financial abuse, isolation, threats, intimidation, and so on). Similarly, some researchers position partner stalking as a type of IPV, based on the specific behaviours perpetrated by the aggressor, but irrespective of whether such behaviours occurred within an intact or separated relationship phase (e.g. Basile & Hall, 2011; Breiding et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2022; Mechanic et al., 2000; Walker et al., 2006).

Together, these findings—alongside the comparisons to previous research—highlight the considerable heterogeneity in perceptions of these phenomena and how potential distinctions are explained, as well as a lack of clarity around what the terms (partner) 'stalking' and 'coercive control' represent in both theory and practice. Overall, differences were mirrored across practice and research in (a) whether partner stalking was positioned as distinct from IPV overall and from other types of IPV and, if so, (b) whether such distinctions were based on relationship phase or types of behaviour.

Assessing Stalking as a Risk Factor for IPV Recurrence

Despite the demonstrated heterogeneity in defining and identifying partner stalking and, thus, the potentially unreliable nature of partner stalking as a variable for predicting the risk of ongoing IPV, specialist IPV practitioners consistently perceived partner stalking as a

dangerous phenomenon¹⁸. Similarly, IPV practice guidelines emphasise partner stalking as a high-risk factor for ongoing IPV (Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). Accordingly, we explored whether partner stalking predicted two subsequent IPV outcomes in study three.

The findings showed a weak relationship between partner stalking and ongoing IPV, at least as measured by (a) any IPV recurrence and (b) physical recurrence reported to NZP over a 12-month period. Specifically, partner stalking on its own significantly predicted any recurrence, but not when accounting for other risk factors; and partner stalking did not predict physical recurrence, on its own or alongside other risk factors. Previous studies predicting any recurrence found the reverse of our study (i.e., partner stalking was a significant risk factor when accounting for other variables but not when analysed on its own; Almond et al., 2017; Ringland, 2018). On the other hand, previous studies predicting physical recurrence aligned with our study (e.g., Almond et al., 2017; Gerbrandji et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2021; Ringland, 2018). Together, these findings indicate that partner stalking may not predict any recurrence and does not predict physical recurrence. As such, partner stalking may not warrant special consideration for risk prediction in this practice context, and these findings challenge assumptions that partner stalking always represents a dangerous phenomenon when occurring in abusive relationships.

Theoretical Implications

Overall, we have three overarching concerns from a theoretical perspective. The first involves a potential circularity in logic regarding how both researchers and practitioners emphasise partner stalking. The second relates to the confusion around defining and understanding partner stalking that seems to result from partner stalking research developing

¹⁸ Although not included within the scope of study two, a quotation from P10 exemplifies this point: "...stalking, that's the kind of behaviour that could lead to them being seriously hurt or even killed. So that's probably, the way ISR, at least, and the police, would see stalking as like this high-risk behaviour. Yeah, that's where- Yeah, serious harm can occur."

concurrently out of both the general stalking literature and the IPV literature. And the final concern is the corresponding lack of sophistication underpinning how researchers and practitioners define partner stalking and distinguish partner stalking from other IPV-related constructs, especially coercive control. We discuss these issues in turn below.

As detailed throughout this thesis, confusion persists in how partner stalking seems to be understood and discussed across both research and practice. We argue that a circularity in logic exists. As exemplified below, practitioners and practice-related resources sometimes superficially point to research to highlight the importance of partner stalking, and such assumptions in practice often also set the tone for researchers, without explicit acknowledgement of, or meaningful attempts to address, any sources of confusion related to partner stalking identification, definitions, or risk assessment. In other words, researchers and practitioners alike frame partner stalking as important without critically evaluating the ‘supporting’ evidence or counterevidence for the positions taken. Similar assumptions about coercive control have been cited as problematic (see Dempsey et al., 2020). But such situations are not isolated to this area of research or practice, with similar issues also prevalent across other areas of health, social justice, and trauma-informed practice (e.g., trigger warnings¹⁹).

For example, and as discussed fully in study three, IPV practice guidelines assign a special status to partner stalking as a key risk factor for serious ongoing IPV harm and lethality (Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018), but the empirical evidence usually cited to support this point (e.g., Campbell et al., 2003; McFarlane et al., 1999) does not robustly demonstrate such a relationship. This disconnect is often also mirrored in the literature, when risk prediction may not be the focus of the study, but

¹⁹ Despite a widespread and popular belief that trigger warnings reduce the likelihood of distress, evidence suggests such warnings can increase or decrease distress (see Sanson et al., 2019).

researchers (e.g., Logan & Walker, 2017; Melton, 2007b) make this same point uncritically for background purposes. Similarly, and as found in study two, practitioners consistently emphasised partner stalking as an important practice consideration in IPV cases, but they also struggled to articulate their own understanding of partner stalking or how partner stalking differed from other types of harm, suggesting the reality of how partner stalking is treated in practice does not align with such best practice-related claims. Together, the assumption that partner stalking represents an important phenomenon requiring attention distinct from other types of harm seems to persist across a range of research- and practice-related sources and contexts. Accordingly, we question whether this is a valid assumption and encourage future research to either explicitly and robustly justify such claims or avoid a starting point that uncritically adopts this perspective.

Another challenge involves consolidating partner stalking-specific findings from across two different literatures. To date, relevant findings have been produced concurrently—but mostly separately—from within both the general stalking literature and the IPV (or domestic abuse) literature. And these research areas usually represent divergent philosophical and definitional positions for understanding partner stalking, particularly regarding the relevance of the relationship phase between the aggressor and victim (see McEwan et al., 2021). The general stalking literature involves studies that include all types of aggressor-victim relationships. While there are notable exceptions (e.g., Mullen et al., 2006), individual studies within this literature often analyse partner stalking aggressors as one group and then draw comparisons with other types of groups, such as aggressors who stalk strangers or acquaintances (e.g., Logan, 2020; Mohandie et al., 2006; Sheridan & Davies, 2001; White et al., 2020); thus, applying these partner stalking findings to all cases of partner stalking. Such approaches typically overlook the within-group heterogeneity that exists in (a) case characteristics (e.g., Thorburn & Jury, 2019) and (b) possible explanations of partner

stalking, such as attachment styles, coercive control theory, and relational goal pursuit theory (see Parkhill et al., 2022 for an overview). Accordingly, such approaches typically do not adequately account for the complexities of, nor fully inform theory development about, partner stalking specifically.

And different issues persist within the IPV literature. Again, while exceptions exist (e.g., Garza et al., 2020; Jung et al., 2022), IPV-focussed studies often fail to explicitly define partner stalking (e.g., Love et al., 2020; Robinson & Howarth, 2012); or measure partner stalking in a much less robust way than recommended in the general stalking literature, typically as stalking behaviour (e.g., Melton, 2012) or as stalking-related items from IPV risk assessment instruments (e.g., Almond et al., 2017; Ringland, 2018). This definitional and measurement heterogeneity significantly hinders knowledge synthesis. Taken together, we believe it would be beneficial for researchers from across both literatures to more explicitly state their own positioning in this regard and acknowledge the specifics of their approaches in relation to other possible partner stalking-related perspectives, to improve overall knowledge synthesis about this phenomenon. Without this level of detail, considerable—but largely unexamined—confusion will persist, and research will not be best placed to inform partner stalking-related practice.

Finally, we argue that research and practice definitions for partner stalking are currently no more sophisticated than what one would expect from a lay person's definition. Definitions to date typically emphasize the types of behaviour that should be included or excluded under the umbrella term of partner stalking, rather than abstracting a common or overarching definition of stalking based on that list. And definitions are sometimes also tautological, with an early quotation from Westrup and Fremouw (1998, p.258) stating “a stalker, then, is an individual who stalks or engages in these behaviours”. Even in current research, definitions and understandings often remain stunted at a topographical, surface

level, with an emphasis on behavioural lists rather summarising what makes stalking ‘stalking’, as compared to other types of harm. Further, commonly used delineations in definitions of stalking (i.e., based on relationship phase or types of behaviour) arguably only superficially differentiate this construct from other types of harm. However, to apply definitions of partner stalking to novel, complex situations, and meaningfully distinguish partner stalking from other types of IPV harm, a more comprehensive definition of partner stalking would be required than just focusing on often wide-ranging behaviours that are unwanted, repeated, and cause some kind of negative victim impact; as this current definition could widely apply to other types of violence.

Several limitations of these relationship phase or behavioural approaches are relevant. For example, the dichotomisation of relationship phase as intact versus separated remains an issue; because it currently does not clearly account for how to define partner stalking during the on-off relationship phase that is experienced by many aggressors and victims, as shown in our first study. Further, our findings from study two indicated that partner stalking was perceived and recorded by practitioners as primarily—but not exclusively—occurring in the on-off or separated relationship phases, so relationship phase does not appear to be the only criterion currently used for distinguishing partner stalking from other types of IPV. And finally, behaviours alone can also not account for the conceptual complexity of differentiating partner stalking from other types of harm. Myriad behaviours may look similar but serve diverse functions, both for individual aggressors and across different phases in a relationship (Westrup & Fremouw, 1998). Further, emerging behaviours that could logically fit a definition of partner stalking (e.g., behaviours involving new technology, see Brady et al., 2023) may be missed if we rely exclusively on behaviours that are explicitly itemised on current lists or measures for defining partner stalking.

More broadly, other complexities exist in trying to distinguish between partner stalking and coercive control. First, both represent pattern-based phenomena so, unlike many other crime types, are difficult to determine from one incident alone (Pathé et al., 2004; Wiener, 2017). Additionally, partner stalking and coercive control require knowledge about aggressor intent and victim impact, and both involve behaviours that may be normal or benign in other contexts; so conceptualising and operationalising these phenomena exclusively using behavioural lists is thus inadequate (Hamberger et al., 2017; McEwan et al., 2007). And finally, both partner stalking and coercive control suffer labelling-related confusion across the literature, whereby the same terms are defined differently, and different terms are defined similarly. We argue that terms like (partner) stalking, harassment, persistent pursuit, and obsessive relational intrusion either have highly overlapping definitions or lack clear explanations regarding how they differ. And others have argued that terms like coercive control, power and control, dominance and control, and control represent the same constructs (Hamberger et al., 2017). These issues reflect some additional, general challenges in defining and operationalizing these two phenomena.

On the weight of these points, there seem to be no obvious, current conceptual benefits to distinguishing partner stalking from coercive control or even more broadly, psychological abuse. Instead, we argue there may be value in partner stalking being defined as a type of coercive control (which, in turn is defined as a type of psychological abuse). Such an approach aligns with current family violence legislation in New Zealand (Family Violence Act, 2018)²⁰, as well as much of the coercive control and overall IPV research (e.g., Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Hilton et al., 2023; Stark, 2007). A potential research implication of this approach would be the reduction in the number and diversity of studies measuring the

²⁰ And, given the difficulties defining and operationalising coercive control within legal frameworks (e.g., Robinson et al., 2018; Wiener, 2017), intentionally combining the concepts of coercive control and stalking may also improve efforts to legislate against and police these phenomena.

same phenomenon but applying different labels, such as partner stalking, harassment, controlling behaviour, and coercive control. In turn, this approach could ensure more precise measurement and labelling of this type of harm and support knowledge advancement overall, as currently it remains unclear whether and, if so, how such differences should be reconciled, and findings synthesised.

Practical Implications

With reference to (a) low partner stalking identification rates, (b) the heterogeneity in practice-based definitions of partner stalking, (c) a lack of clarity and consistency about how practitioners distinguish partner stalking from other types of harm, especially coercive control, and (d) practitioners' concerns about the overall IPV sector's competence in understanding and responding to partner stalking, recommending partner stalking-specific training to both police and specialist IPV practitioners may seem like an obvious implication of this research. Such training could focus on developing shared knowledge of partner stalking among practitioners, as well as improving their ability to accurately detect and consistently respond to this phenomenon. Several other researchers have cited training-related recommendations for (partner and general) stalking (e.g., Maran et al., 2019; Backes et al., 2020; Brady et al., 2020; Brady & Nobles, 2017; Garza et al., 2020; Thorburn & Jury, 2019; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). However, we argue that the lack of conceptual clarity around partner stalking in the research literature still represents a major barrier in developing evidence-based training materials. And training alone cannot overcome the current heterogeneity in (partner and general) stalking-specific knowledge and practice (HMIC, 2017). As emphasised above, urgent theory development is likely required before meaningful practical advancements can occur regarding training.

Another important implication is the apparent disconnect between practice guidelines and empirical evidence. Practice guidelines currently emphasise the importance of partner

stalking as a risk factor for various IPV outcomes and the corresponding need for identification, assessment, and response processes for partner stalking that are distinct from other types of harm in IPV cases (Ministry of Justice, 2017; SafeLives, 2015; Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). But the findings from the three studies in this thesis, and the broader research literature, highlight a more complicated practice context than these guidelines suggest and provide minimal evidence to support these risk prediction claims. Key complications include heterogeneity among practitioners about what constitutes partner stalking and whether they perceive partner stalking as a distinct construct from other types of IPV (e.g., coercive control). In turn, consistent term use and reliable partner stalking identification seem elusive among practitioners in the IPV sector.

Without a clear and shared understanding of partner stalking, it may be that practitioners' information gathering, record keeping, their corresponding risk assessments, case management, and responses are highly inconsistent regarding partner stalking in IPV cases. Such inconsistencies could negatively impact practitioner efforts regarding aggressor accountability and victim safety in cases of IPV that involve partner stalking. For example, practitioners may miss partner stalking-specific responses required for aggressor accountability, such as explicit conditions in court orders (e.g., related to the aggressor's use of technology or physical proximity to the victim). Likewise, victims may miss out on safety planning measures that are specific to partner stalking (e.g., relating to security and technology) or psychoeducation support that helps them to self-identify and respond to partner stalking victimisation early.

However, considerable emphasis—at least in the New Zealand practice context—is placed on responsive approaches that meet the individual and wider familial needs of both the aggressor and victim (e.g., Mossman et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014a, 2014b). So, even if practitioners do not explicitly identify and label partner stalking in IPV cases and, instead,

intentionally conceptualise partner stalking as a type of coercive control (as recommended above), we are confident that they would still manage such behaviours in responsive ways²¹ with no negative impacts on aggressor accountability or victim safety expected. So, this issue may be less concerning than it initially appears, though it cannot be directly examined within the scope of our current research. Overall, we are not advocating that partner stalking should (or should not) be emphasised within guidelines and practice. Instead, we believe that drawing attention to this overlooked disconnect is important because, at a minimum, the findings suggest that actual practice currently contradicts ‘best practice’ expectations in the IPV sector (i.e., practitioners are not explicitly and consistently conducting identification, assessment, and response processes for stalking that are distinct from other types of harm in IPV cases). Accordingly, a possible interim option could be to de-emphasise partner stalking in practice resources until empirical research can better support its inclusion and guide specific partner stalking-related practice recommendations.

Finally, accurately accounting for the prevalence of partner stalking in IPV cases is necessary to better inform resource allocation, as well as specific practice and policy recommendations (HMICFRS, 2019). The findings from study one showed how changes to definitional criteria for partner stalking can impact prevalence estimates, and prior research has similarly noted this concern (e.g., Owens, 2016; Quinn-Evans et al., 2019). Further, the findings from studies one and two showed that relying solely on practitioner estimates would also be problematic, given the lack of explicit identification in police episode reports and the lack of clarity in specialist IPV practitioners’ understanding of partner stalking. Such statistics are also not systematically collected in New Zealand at present. Thus, to meaningfully advance locally specific insights about partner stalking, one practical

²¹ For example, in study two, P11 did not clearly differentiate between stalking and coercive control but spoke about supporting victims to take their phones to IT retailers to check for tracking-related malicious spyware as part of safety planning that was responsive to the individual’s circumstances and concerns.

recommendation could be prioritising the collection of prevalence-focused data. One possible approach could involve the inclusion of a partner stalking-specific screening question in population level research, such as the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey. For example, the Australian Personal Safety Survey includes a question to assess for the 12-month prevalence rate of stalking, by asking whether participants experienced specific behaviours (e.g., loitering, following) that were believed to be undertaken with the intention of causing the participant fear or distress (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Another possible approach would be the revision of NZP's IPV data collection processes. Here, different options exist. Other researchers have recommended that police practitioners use a separate screening instrument with multiple questions to support stalking-specific data collection and decision-making (see Sheridan & Roberts, 2011). But given the demands on NZP and the limited frontline resources available, a more efficient option could be adding a single screening question into their episode report template for IPV episodes. For example, NZP currently have tick box selections for multiple types of IPV harm, including physical violence, sexual violence, verbal abuse, threats of harm, and property damage; so, partner stalking could be added to these summary variables. On one hand, and in support of this option, it would not significantly add to attending officers' workloads when completing episode report documentation and could encourage police to proactively collect partner stalking-specific information. On the other hand, and in opposition of this option, it may be unnecessary given our findings confirmed that, to some extent and without such a prompt, police can and do document information in IPV episode reports that satisfy the criteria for common measures of partner stalking (e.g., Truman & Morgan, 2021). Further, without addressing the current heterogeneity in practice-based definitions and labelling of partner stalking, these data collection efforts in isolation, and without sufficient training, may still yield relatively superficial, inconsistent outcomes. In other words, how could we be certain

that police who affirmatively record that partner stalking is present share consistent interpretations of the phenomenon that this term represents? However, we note that making practical recommendations about these options remains outside the scope of this thesis.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations and recommendations for future research are specific to each study and were detailed in chapters two to four. As such, we now focus on considerations relevant to the overall thesis, and discuss these strengths, limitations, and directions for future research thematically below.

Mixed-Methods Study Design

Important strengths of this research included the mixed methods approach (which has been recommended by other researchers, e.g., Parkhill et al., 2022) and the specific data sources used. Recall that studies one and three involved the collation of both police-recorded variables and manually coded variables from the narrative, free-text section of police episode reports. This data provided a snapshot of both the IPV cases sampled and the corresponding police practices in such cases. Given that police (and other practitioners) often only have this type of information available to conduct initial risk assessments and case planning, the findings from these studies are directly relevant to IPV-related practice. This approach was also valuable from a research perspective because surprisingly minimal partner stalking research has used archival police data to consider these types of research questions (e.g., Garza et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2009; Melton, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), despite police representing the main entry point to the criminal justice system and often also a referral pathway into social services (New Zealand Police, n.d.; Mossman et al., 2017).

The length of the data collection in these quantitative studies represents another key strength of this research. For study one, this period spanned six months for each case. And for study three, this period spanned an additional 12 months for each case. Although labour

intensive, this approach yielded a more comprehensive overview of partner stalking in cases of IPV reported to police than would have been possible from research that only examined a single point in time (i.e., study one) or used a short follow-up duration (i.e., study three).

Further, study two involved interviews with specialist IPV practitioners. This qualitative approach provided rich data about an important practice context that has largely been overlooked in stalking research. Instead, researchers often focus on data from victims (e.g., Logan et al., 2007; Melton, 2007a), aggressors (e.g., Norris et al., 2011; Wheatley et al., 2021), community (e.g., De Smet et al., 2015; Hayes & Kopp, 2023) or university samples (e.g., Björklund et al., 2010; Dardis & Gidycz, 2019) and forensic mental health samples (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2008; McEwan, Daffern, et al., 2017). Although valuable pieces of the puzzle, some of these data sources do not directly apply to the IPV sector. Thus, the variety of samples used in this thesis yielded insights about partner stalking cases at the dyadic level (i.e., the police data was usually informed by both victim and aggressor reports; and we tracked unique cases rather than individual aggressors or victims), and about both police and specialist IPV practitioners. Such an approach to data collection gave a highly practical lens to this research, and yielded insights that are directly relevant to mainstream IPV practice.

Using a variety of methods also enabled us to explore issues at different levels of specificity and, ultimately, triangulate some of the findings. The findings regarding relationship phase were a notable example of this triangulation. In study one, police primarily recorded stalking in cases where the aggressor and victim were either in an on-off or separated phase, rather than within intact relationships. But, given the nature of this archival data source, no further details were available, so we were unable to explore how relationship phase related to police practitioners' definitions of partner stalking. Thus, the qualitative analysis conducted in study two facilitated an extension of these findings, whereby we could

better understand the complexity of practitioners' perceptions regarding relationship phase. Recall that although the specialist IPV practitioners interviewed provided mixed conclusions about the relevance of relationship phase, they almost exclusively described partner stalking case examples that included ex-partners. Together these findings provided different levels of specificity to, ultimately, suggest that practitioners primarily perceive partner stalking as a phenomenon that occurs outside of intact relationships.

Future research could involve repeating the second study with a sample of frontline police officers. Understanding how different types of practitioners in the IPV sector define partner stalking, and whether they distinguish stalking from coercive control, would contribute increasingly comprehensive insights about these issues. And given the importance of multi-agency collaboration in the IPV sector, and the correspondingly interconnected practice of police and other service providers in New Zealand (e.g., the Integrated Safety Response; Mossman et al., 2019), understanding the extent to which different types of practitioners share a common language and understanding about partner stalking seems valuable for meaningfully informing practical recommendations in the future.

Confusion Regarding Partner Stalking and Coercive Control

Within the scope and design of this thesis, we could only conduct initial explorations regarding the relationship between partner stalking and coercive control (i.e., in study two). A major limitation of studies one and three thus involved the lack of clarity about how police practitioners understood and recorded partner stalking compared to other types of IPV, especially coercive control. We could not always determine whether cases without documented partner stalking meant that (a) partner stalking had never occurred, (b) attending officers overlooked stalking in their appraisals of harm, or (c) attending officers recognised these behaviours but interpreted and documented them as coercive control (or another type of IPV harm). Regarding the latter, examining partner stalking and coercive control within the

policing context of “an incident-based framework” (Messing et al., 2020, p. 701) means that considerable detail is inevitably missed. And even in study two, we were restricted to practitioners’ perspectives about partner stalking and coercive control, which were valuable but cannot provide the whole picture. As such, future research could explore similar research questions using aggressors’ and victims’ perspectives about their experiences of partner stalking and coercive control to directly inform theory development and construct refinement for these phenomena. To this end, it would be valuable to develop understandings about when, how, and why partner stalking behaviours begin and escalate to stalking across the life course of abusive relationships. Such a research focus would provide one way of better teasing out the potential overlaps and distinctions between partner stalking and coercive control.

Another direction for future research could involve quantitative analysis of the relationship between partner stalking and coercive control, based on how these constructs are documented in police episode reports for IPV. First, to extend the methods used in study one, researchers could manually code a measure of coercive control—that did not include partner stalking—to describe the presence of (recorded) coercive control in police episode reports across time and analyse the correlation between these two constructs within cases reported to NZP. Next, to extend the methods used in study three, researchers could also predict IPV recurrence outcomes using coercive control and then compare the predictive abilities of partner stalking and coercive control. Such research would provide valuable empirical evidence about whether partner stalking represents a distinct construct from coercive control within the current IPV practice context for police.

Data

Other data limitations are relevant to studies one and three. In addition to the police-specific documentation issues already noted, there may be some broader concerns regarding

both victims and third parties. For example, IPV victims may not be aware that their experiences constitute partner stalking, they may believe that partner stalking is less worthy of police attention than other types of harm, or they may be less confident in police responses for partner stalking than other types of harm (e.g., Melton, 2012; Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2021). These issues would logically impact victims' likelihood of reporting a partner stalking episode to police or disclosing partner stalking-specific information during a call out.

Additionally, it may be difficult for third parties—who reported a considerable proportion of the sampled episodes in studies one and three and, at times, were important sources of the information documented by attending officers—to detect partner stalking behaviours. In isolation and without understanding the intimacies of the relationship context between the aggressor and victim, such behaviours may not appear abusive to third parties (Walker et al., 2006). Wider evidence indicates partner stalking victims often do not self-identify stalking (e.g., Englebrecht & Reys, 2011; Ménard & Cox, 2016) and that third parties often normalise partner stalking and overlook the potential seriousness of this phenomenon (e.g., Becker et al., 2021; McKeon et al., 2015). And as demonstrated in study two, practitioners held negative stereotypes about partner stalking, so victims and third parties may (a) be susceptible to such perspectives and (b) hold similar stereotypes; both of which could inhibit their identification or disclosure of partner stalking. Together, these issues may have contributed to underestimated partner stalking prevalence rates in study one and, in turn, obscured the ability of partner stalking to predict IPV recurrence outcomes in study three.

Potential misidentification of aggressors and victims is another consideration. Based on information from the involved parties, attending police officers must consider the overall pattern of harm and identify the predominant aggressor and primary victim in each IPV case; but—for myriad reasons (e.g., gender biases, aggressor or victim manipulation, incomplete information, difficulties weighting current episode versus prior relationship context)—police

may not always accurately identify these roles (Hamel, 2011). Accordingly, a limitation of studies one and three was our reliance on police role assignment within the index episode. In other words, some of the individuals labelled by police as the aggressor in the index episode and, in turn, categorised as the aggressor across our research, may have been more accurately identified as the primary victim. In turn, potential instances of partner stalking in such cases were overlooked, and the number of cases where this was an issue is unknown in our sample. As such, researchers in future studies of this kind could manually code these roles based on the overall pattern of harm documented within each case, rather than defaulting to the role assignment selected by police within index episodes. Such an approach would better account for misidentification-related concerns and may support more accurate (researcher) identification of partner stalking in IPV cases reported to police.

Measurement

Finally, recording partner stalking dichotomously (i.e., present versus absent) represented a limitation of studies one and three. Measured this way, potential heterogeneity within partner stalking cases was overlooked. For example, each specific type of stalking behaviour (e.g., unwanted phone contact, the aggressor following the victim, showing up at the victim's home) exists on a spectrum, whereby a version of each act can be associated with relatively minor through to more extreme levels of aggression and victim harm. Similarly, different combinations of stalking behaviours represent another aspect of severity worth considering. Better accounting for partner stalking severity thus represents an extension opportunity for future research, from both a descriptive (as in study one) and risk prediction (as in study three) perspective. Such analysis could support theoretically and practically relevant insights about partner stalking heterogeneity, regarding the likely diversity in aggressor motivations and the associated, responsive interventions required.

Future research could further expand the scope of measures included. For example, to better understand the NZP practice context, one study could examine police responses and compare IPV cases with and without partner stalking, regarding patterns in offence detection, arrest, charges laid, Police Safety Orders, and enforcement of Protection Orders.

Alternatively, future research could extend study two by examining the number of recurrences reported to police, over various follow-up periods, and include greater detail about these episodes (e.g., the presence of partner stalking, other types of IPV, severity and harm levels, victim injury). Such exploration, especially longitudinally, would provide relevant empirical evidence for informing practice guidelines.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings in this thesis demonstrate that police and specialist IPV practitioners lack a shared understanding of partner stalking. This confusion hinders their ability to clearly define and identify this phenomenon. And despite common assumptions that partner stalking represents a distinct type of harm from IPV overall, or from other types of IPV, considerable confusion persists about what the terms (partner) ‘stalking’ and ‘coercive control’ represent in both theory and practice. Further, partner stalking was a weak predictor of any IPV recurrence and did not predict physical IPV recurrence. Based on this heterogeneity and ambiguity in partner stalking knowledge, and the weak risk prediction picture, we argue that there may be limited value in framing stalking as a concern that is distinct from other types of harm within abusive relationships. However, it would be valuable for future research to investigate when, how, and why behaviours related to partner stalking and coercive control manifest across the course of abusive relationships to better inform theory development and definition refinement, especially regarding the potential distinctions between these phenomena.

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Appendix A: Co-Authorship Forms



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Co-Authorship Form

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Chapter 2, Study 1 - Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2023). Hiding in plain sight: Identifying partner stalking in intimate partner violence episodes reported to New Zealand Police. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2023.2219812>

Nature of contribution
by PhD candidate

Collected and analysed the data; wrote the paper

Extent of contribution
by PhD candidate (%)

70

CO-AUTHORS

Name	Nature of Contribution
Dr Lisa Tompson	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper
Professor Devon Polaschek	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper

Certification by Co-Authors

The undersigned hereby certify that:

- ❖ the above statement correctly reflects the nature and extent of the PhD candidate's contribution to this work, and the nature of the contribution of each of the co-authors; and
- ❖ that the candidate wrote all or the majority of the text.

Name	Signature	Date
Dr Lisa Tompson	<i>Lisa Tompson</i>	29/05/2024
Professor Devon Polaschek	<i>Devon Polaschek</i>	May 30, 2024



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Chapter 3, Study 2 - Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Heterogeneity in practitioners' definitions of stalking in intimate partner violence cases. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Nature of contribution
by PhD candidate

Collected and analysed the data; wrote the paper

Extent of contribution
by PhD candidate (%)

70

CO-AUTHORS

Name	Nature of Contribution
Dr Lisa Tompson	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper
Professor Devon Polaschek	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper

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Chapter 4, Study 3 - Tomkins, J., Tompson, L., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Stalking as a possible risk factor for subsequent intimate partner violence reported to New Zealand Police. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

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