



Article

Is It a Crime? Cyberstalking Victims' Reasons for Not Reporting to Law Enforcement

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Abstract: Using a sample of 376 young adults (18- to 25-year-olds) who had been cyberstalked in the previous 12 months, the current study attempts to (1) understand the self-identified reasons behind cyberstalking victims' choice to not report their experiences to law enforcement and (2) determine if there are gender or racial differences associated with the reasons for not reporting. Findings revealed that approximately 86% of cyberstalking victims did not personally report their victimization to law enforcement. The most common reasons for not reporting included not knowing their experience was criminal in nature (53.99%), dealing with it another way (42.82%), and thinking the police would not do anything for them (32.98%) or would not be helpful (31.91%). Analyses also revealed that there were gender-specific differences in one of the reasons for not reporting. Women and another gender identity selected "Thought the police would not do anything" significantly more than men. Implications for these findings are provided.

Keywords: cyberstalking; victims; reporting; gender; race



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1. Introduction

Cyberstalking, which is defined as the repeated pursuit behavior of an individual using communication technologies that cause the target to experience a substantial emotional response or fear for their safety or the safety of someone close to them (Fissel et al. 2023; Kaur et al. 2021), impacts a substantial number of individuals (Fissel et al. 2023; Kaur et al. 2021; Morgan and Truman 2022; Reyns et al. 2011). A recent estimate from a nationally representative sample of United States residents aged 16 or older suggests that 3.4 million people experienced stalking in 2019, with 2.7 million of these victims experiencing cyberstalking behaviors (Morgan and Truman 2022). Despite this, few cyberstalking cases are ever processed through the criminal justice system. One study using eight years of data from the Houston Police Department found that there were 3756 stalking calls for service, yet only 12 arrests were made for stalking (Brady and Nobles 2017). Moreover, at the federal level, only 412 cyberstalking cases were filed in a ten-year period between 2010 and 2020 (Adamson et al. 2023).

Perhaps even more concerning, research has consistently revealed that few (cyber)stalking victims choose to report their experiences to law enforcement (Brady et al. 2023; Fissel 2021; Reyns and Englebrecht 2010), with those who experience only cyberstalking reporting less often than stalking victims who experience offline forms of stalking (Morgan and Truman 2022). This is troubling given that crime victims have been referred to as "the most influential of all criminal justice decision makers" (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1987), as a significant number of crimes would never be detected by the criminal justice system without their reporting. As such, the lack of reporting by victims impedes the deterrent function of the criminal justice system.

Moreover, research has revealed that cyberstalking victims experience a range of severe harms as a result of their victimization, including psychological distress (Dreßing et al. 2014; Short et al. 2015), physical health consequences (Fissel and Reyns 2020; Short

et al. 2014), social consequences (Fissel and Reyns 2020; Short et al. 2014), and school or work challenges (Fissel and Reyns 2020; Worsley et al. 2017). Thus, nonreporting limits access to criminal justice and victim service resources, which victims may need to recover from their experiences to address the associated harms. Thus, it is imperative to better understand cyberstalking victims' reporting choices.

The existing literature helps provide an initial understanding of the factors that impact a cyberstalking victim's likelihood of engaging in various forms of reporting and help-seeking behaviors. Specifically, this body of knowledge identifies who is likely to report to law enforcement given certain demographic characteristics or incident characteristics. For example, research has found that men—relative to women—are significantly more likely to report their cyberstalking victimization experiences to law enforcement (Fissel 2021). However, other research has found that female cyberstalking victims who knew their perpetrator were more likely to contact police relative to male victims; gender was not significant, however, when assessing the reporting behaviors of all cyberstalking victims (i.e., those who did and did not know their perpetrator; Reyns and Englebrecht 2010). The literature on cyberstalking victims' reporting decisions is limited, yet the research on victims of other crime types also reveals differences in reporting across gender (e.g., Pino and Meier 1999) and race (e.g., Rennison et al. 2011). Despite these findings, little is known about *why* cyberstalking victims choose to report or not.

Taken together, it is imperative to better understand why individuals are not reporting their cyberstalking victimization to law enforcement and receiving the services and resources needed to recover from such experiences. Thus, the current study fills this gap in the literature by examining the reason(s) cyberstalking victims identify as to why they did not report their experiences to law enforcement. Further examination is also provided to determine if there are gender and/or racial differences in the identified reasons for not reporting, given the differences in reporting behaviors across gender and race noted above.

1.1. Reporting Victimization Experiences

While statistics vary across individual types of criminal victimization, data reveal that a significant number of individuals of all crime types do not report their experiences to law enforcement (Langton et al. 2012). As such, there is an emerging body of literature aimed at understanding the reporting and help-seeking behaviors of crime victims. One popular theory that has been used to explain reporting and help-seeking behaviors of crime victims is Gottfredson and Gottfredson's theory of decision making (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1987). In short, this perspective argues that three factors—the seriousness of the offense, the offender's prior criminal record, and the victim–offender relationship—impact decisions (e.g., victim reporting; sentencing) made throughout the criminal justice system process (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1987). This perspective has been applied to a number of crime types, including intimate partner violence (Akers and Kaukinen 2009), sexual victimization (Fisher et al. 2003), identity theft (Reyns and Randa 2017), and cyberstalking (Fissel 2021; Reyns and Englebrecht 2010).

Most relevant to the current study, the research has found support for Gottfredson and Gottfredson's theory of decision making as an explanation for cyberstalking victim's decisions to report to law enforcement. Addressing the first theoretical factor of offense seriousness, cyberstalking incidents that have a longer duration (Fissel 2021) and result in consequences (Fissel 2021; Reyns and Englebrecht 2010) have an increased likelihood of being reported to law enforcement. The second theoretical factor has also been found to have a significant relationship with reporting decisions, as cyberstalking victims who noted their offender had a prior criminal record were more likely to report their experiences to law enforcement (Reyns and Englebrecht 2010). Finally, the victim–offender relationship significantly impacts cyberstalking victims' decision to report their experiences to law enforcement (Fissel 2021; Reyns and Englebrecht 2010), which is the third theoretical factor.

As previously noted, this body of research is beneficial to understanding the predictors and correlates of crime victims' reporting behaviors. However, some scholars have sought

further explanation as to why individuals choose not to officially report their victimization experiences. To accomplish this, researchers have asked victims to indicate the reasons why they decided not to report their victimization experiences to law enforcement. In one study of all violent victimizations not reported to police between 2006 and 2010, the most commonly identified reason for not reporting was “Dealt with in another way/personal” (Langton et al. 2012). Research has also found that victims of sexual assault have noted that they did not report their experiences to law enforcement due to feelings of shame (Carson et al. 2020; Thompson et al. 2007), fear of consequences (Carson et al. 2020; Thompson et al. 2007), privacy concerns (Carson et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2007), minimization of experience (Carson et al. 2020), uncertainty about whether a victimization was experienced (Fisher et al. 2003), a belief that it was not serious enough (Fisher et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2007), and concern that the police would not be interested or could not do anything (Fisher et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2007). Domestic violence and intimate partner violence victims have reported similar reasons for not reporting their experiences to law enforcement (Langton et al. 2012; Felson et al. 2002).

While this body of knowledge has identified important reasons for not reporting to law enforcement, which has presented the opportunity for the criminal justice system to address these barriers to reporting, this line of inquiry has been largely overlooked for cyberstalking. One exception to this is the National Crime Victimization Survey’s (NCVS) Supplemental Victimization Survey (SVS). Results suggest that individuals who experienced cyberstalking only most commonly indicated that their experience was not important enough to report (43%). This was followed by victims noting that they dealt with it in another way (39.1%), thought police could not do anything (33%), or thought police would not do anything (15%). A small percentage noted they did not report to the police due to fearing the offender (5%) (Morgan and Truman 2022). It would be irresponsible to assume that the reasons for not reporting to law enforcement are consistent across all forms of victimization. This is especially true given that cyberstalking is unique in that it is online (which may be associated with more digital evidence) and because it inherently involves repeated incidents (which could be viewed as more serious).

1.2. Current Study

As evidenced by the literature outlined above, there has been little focus on cyberstalking victims’ reporting behaviors, with the existing research focused on identifying correlates of reporting. This has left a gap in knowledge related to understanding the *why* provided from the victim’s perspective. The current study adds to the literature in two main ways. First, this is one of few existing studies that attempt to understand the cyberstalking victim’s explanation for why they did not report their experiences to law enforcement. Second, this is the first known study that assesses gender and race differences across reasons for cyberstalking victims not reporting to law enforcement. In doing so, the current study answers the following research questions:

- (1) What do cyberstalking victims identify is (are) the reason(s) for not reporting their victimization experiences to law enforcement?
- (2) Are there gender differences in cyberstalking victims’ reasons for not reporting to law enforcement?
- (3) Are there racial differences in cyberstalking victims’ reasons for not reporting to law enforcement?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data and Participants

These research questions were answered utilizing data collected between late November 2017 and early January 2018 as part of a large study on cyberstalking. Individuals were eligible to participate in the study if they had an active Mechanical Turk (MTurk) worker account, were English-speaking, between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, and residing in the United States at the time of the study. MTurk is one of the most popular

online crowdsourcing platforms where individuals (i.e., “requesters”) can post Human Intelligence Tasks (HITS) and “workers” can then select which tasks they want to complete for a small monetary award. Within recent history, the use of crowdsourcing for academic research has become commonplace (Robinson et al. 2019), and studies with MTurk samples have appeared in high-impact journals.

Data were anonymously collected through an online self-report questionnaire from 1500 eligible workers via the Qualtrics platform. The first page of the online survey included the consent document; respondents who proceeded to the next page indicated consent to participate. Individuals were paid USD 0.35 if they successfully completed the questionnaire, and the average completion time was approximately 12 min. The payment was consistent with payment standards on MTurk at the time of data collection (Paolacci and Chandler 2014; Paolacci et al. 2010).

To be considered as having successfully completed the survey, and to ensure the quality of responses, respondents had to pass three attention checks that were presented throughout the survey and provide the correct completion code that was presented at the end of the survey. Attention checks require participants to provide correct responses to questions to ensure that they are not simply clicking through the survey haphazardly to earn money. One example of an attention check is asking respondents to disregard the presented prompt and select the response option of “strongly disagree”. The completion code (random letters and numbers) is presented at the end of the survey within the Qualtrics platform, and respondents had to correctly enter that code on the MTurk platform to be included in the sample.

In this study, cyberstalking victimization is defined as the repeated pursuit (2 or more times), by the same person, of an individual using communication technologies that causes that individual to experience fear or a substantial emotional response. This excludes contact from solicitors, debt collectors, and other salespeople. This definition is drawn from (cyber)stalking statutes (e.g., Illinois’ Cyberstalking Law) and is consistent with previous literature (e.g., Fissel et al. 2022; Morgan and Truman 2022). Respondents answered a series of questions to determine if their experiences met the criteria to be considered cyberstalking victims within the previous 12 months.

First, participants were asked to indicate if, in the previous 12 months, they experienced any of the following behaviors or contacts through communication technologies: (1) unwanted contact or attempted contact; (2) harassment or annoyance; (3) unwanted sexual advances; (4) threats of harm; (5) spied on or activities monitored; (6) whereabouts tracked; and (7) inappropriate, unwanted, or personal posts shared (or threatened to share). These behaviors are commonly included in other research on cyberstalking (e.g., National Crime Victimization Survey’s Supplemental Victimization Survey). Individuals who experienced at least one type of online pursuit behavior were asked to indicate the number of times they experienced each type within the past 12 months. Participants were also asked two additional questions to determine if they experienced fear and/or a substantial emotional response as a result of the repeated pursuit behavior.

Respondents were considered cyberstalking victims if they experienced repeated pursuit online—either one of the behaviors two or more times or at least two behaviors one time each—that resulted in fear and/or a substantial emotional response. Of the 1500 participants, 477 met the criteria and were identified as having experienced cyberstalking victimization within the previous 12 months.

Those who indicated having experienced cyberstalking victimization within the previous 12 months were then asked, “Did anyone contact law enforcement to report the unwanted contacts or behaviors you experienced?” Response options included the following: (1) yes, I did; (2) yes, someone else did; (3) yes, I did and someone else did; and (4) not to my knowledge. Those who selected “Not to my knowledge” were coded as not having reported their experiences to law enforcement. While those who selected “Yes, someone else did” did not personally engage in reporting behaviors; it is unknown if these cyberstalking victims had asked or encouraged the other person to report it on their behalf.

Thus, these individuals were not included in the analytic sample for the current study. The analytic sample for the current study includes those 376 individuals who indicated “Not to my knowledge”, which represents cyberstalking victims who did not report their experiences to law enforcement.

2.2. Measures

To capture reasons for not reporting, participants were asked “What were your reasons for not contacting law enforcement?” Response options were as follows: (1) dealt with it in another way; (2) did not think it was criminal; (3) thought police would not do anything; (4) thought police would not be helpful; (5) was afraid of the person who did these things to me; (6) I do not know; and (7) other, please specify. The “other” responses were recoded into the existing categories when appropriate (e.g., “not criminal what they were doing, just annoying...” was recoded as “did not think it was criminal” and “...I just ignored them” was recoded as “dealt with it in another way”). These reasons for not reporting response options are drawn from the National Crime Victimization Survey’s Supplemental Victimization Survey. Six individual variables were created to capture each response option, where 1 represented a reason selected by participants and 0 represented not being a selected reason.

Gender identity was captured by asking respondents to select the gender identity that best described them from a list of seven identities. Those who identified as men were coded 1, while women and all other gender identities (transgender men; transgender women; genderqueer or gender non-conforming; questioning) were coded 0. Race was measured by asking respondents to select the racial category (-ies) that best described them. Those who identified as White were coded 1, while all other racial categories were coded 0. Both variables had to be dichotomized due to low base rates. While those who identify as another gender identity and women may not have the same experiences, their victimization experiences are typically more similar than men’s victimization experiences. The same is true for those included in the “another race” category.

2.3. Analytic Plan

The analyses in the current study followed a multi-step procedure. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable of interest. Next, a series of chi-square tests for independence were conducted to determine if there was a relationship between (1) gender identity and the reasons for not reporting to law enforcement and (2) race and the reasons for not reporting to law enforcement. Coefficients with p-values equal to or less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

3. Results

Table 1 displays the reasons cyberstalking victims selected as the explanations for why they did not report their victimization experiences to law enforcement. The most commonly selected reason was that they did not know that what they experienced was criminal (53.99%; $n = 203$). This was followed by respondents indicating that they dealt with their experiences in a different way (42.82%; $n = 161$), did not believe that the police would do anything (32.98%; $n = 124$), and did not believe that the police would be helpful (31.91%; $n = 120$). An additional 13% ($n = 49$) of cyberstalking victims indicated that they did not know why they did not report their experiences, and 10% ($n = 40$) noted that they did not report because they were afraid of their cyberstalker. The majority of respondents only selected one reason for not reporting (48.67%; $n = 183$); however, 7% ($n = 28$) selected four or five of the reasons listed (not displayed).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($n = 376$).

Variable	Coding	<i>n</i> (%)
Reasons for not reporting to law enforcement		
Dealt with it in another way	0 = Not endorsed 1 = Endorsed	161 (42.82%)
Did not think it was criminal	0 = Not endorsed 1 = Endorsed	203 (53.99%)
Thought the police would not do anything	0 = Not endorsed 1 = Endorsed	124 (32.98%)
Thought the police would not be helpful	0 = Not endorsed 1 = Endorsed	120 (31.91%)
Was afraid of the person who did these things to me	0 = Not endorsed 1 = Endorsed	40 (10.64%)
I do not know	0 = Not endorsed 1 = Endorsed	49 (13.03%)
Gender	0 = Women and another gender identity 1 = Men	76 (20.21%)
Race	0 = Another race 1 = White	243 (64.63%)

3.1. Gender Analysis

Table 2 presents the chi-square analyses of reasons for not reporting and gender identity. As can be seen, the majority of reasons for not reporting cyberstalking victimization to law enforcement did not yield a statistically significant relationship with gender identity. The sole exception to this is for the item, “Thought the police would not do anything.” Specifically, men who experienced cyberstalking victimization were less likely—relative to women and another gender identity—to select this reason for not reporting their experiences ($\chi^2 = 7.56, p = 0.006$). Approximately 20% of men endorsed this as a reason for not reporting their experiences, while 36% of women and another gender identity selected this reason for not reporting.

Table 2. Reasons for not reporting to law enforcement by gender identity.

	Men (<i>n</i> = 76)	Women and Another Gender Identity (<i>n</i> = 300)
Reason for not Reporting	<i>n</i> (%) within Category)	<i>n</i> (%) within Category)
Dealt with it in another way $\chi^2 = 0.16, p = 0.689$	31 (40.70%)	130 (43.33%)
Did not think it was criminal $\chi^2 = 0.06, p = 0.803$	42 (55.26%)	161 (53.67%)
Thought the police would not do anything $\chi^2 = 7.56, p = 0.006$	15 (19.74%)	109 (36.33%)
Thought the police would not be helpful $\chi^2 = 0.12, p = 0.729$	23 (30.26%)	97 (32.33%)
Was afraid of the person who did these things to me $\chi^2 = 0.20, p = 0.651$	7 (9.21%)	33 (11.00%)
I do not know $\chi^2 = 2.44, p = 0.118$	14 (18.42%)	35 (11.67%)

3.2. Race Analysis

Table 3 presents the chi-square analyses of reasons for not reporting and race. As is displayed, none of the reasons for not reporting to law enforcement had a statistically significant relationship with race.

Table 3. Reasons for not reporting to law enforcement by race.

Reason for not Reporting	White (<i>n</i> = 243)	Another Race (<i>n</i> = 133)
	<i>n</i> (% within Category)	<i>n</i> (% within Category)
Dealt with it in another way $\chi^2 = 0.44, p = 0.506$	101 (41.56%)	60 (45.11%)
Did not think it was criminal $\chi^2 = 0.03, p = 0.862$	132 (54.32%)	71 (53.38%)
Thought the police would not do anything $\chi^2 = 3.25, p = 0.071$	88 (36.21%)	36 (27.07%)
Thought the police would not be helpful $\chi^2 = 2.97, p = 0.085$	85 (34.98%)	35 (26.32%)
Was afraid of the person who did these things to me $\chi^2 = 0.00, p = 0.958$	26 (10.70%)	14 (10.53%)
I do not know $\chi^2 = 0.18, p = 0.669$	33 (13.58%)	16 (12.03%)

4. Discussion

In order to determine how to best encourage and enable victims to report their cyberstalking experiences to law enforcement, it is critical to first understand why a significant percentage of victims are not reporting. As such, this study sought to understand the reasons indicated by cyberstalking victims as the explanations for why they did not report their victimization experiences to law enforcement. Several important conclusions can be drawn from the current findings.

To begin, the data reveal that nearly 86% of cyberstalking victims did not report their experiences to law enforcement, which is consistent with the previous literature suggesting that most cyberstalking victims do not report (Fissel 2021; Reyns and Englebrecht 2010; Brady et al. 2023; Morgan and Truman 2022). In order to better understand why, the first research question guiding this study was as follows: what do cyberstalking victims identify is (are) the reason(s) for not reporting their victimization experiences to law enforcement? The most commonly endorsed reason among the sample of cyberstalking victims was that they did not know that their experiences were criminal. In fact, over half of all non-reporting cyberstalking victims selected this reason. This finding is reflected in the existing literature, which has found that those who self-identify as victims of cyberstalking are more likely to report to law enforcement (Reyns and Englebrecht 2010) and is consistent with reasons for not reporting other forms of interpersonal crime (e.g., Fisher et al. 2003; Zinzow and Thompson 2011). Additional research has found reasons for crime victims not reporting that are similar to not identifying the experience as criminal, including minimization of the experience (e.g., Carson et al. 2020; Morgan and Truman 2022). While the current study's finding is perhaps not surprising—if individuals do not think they experienced a victimization, it is logical that they would not report their experiences to law enforcement—what is of concern, however, is that a large proportion of victims do not know what constitutes (cyber)stalking and/or are unable to identify their own experiences as such (see also Campbell and Moore 2011; McNamara and Marsil 2012). Overall, the general public needs more education and awareness related to identifying cyberstalking experiences and the legal avenues that can be pursued for these cases.

Almost 43% of cyberstalking victims who did not report their experiences to law enforcement noted that they dealt with their experiences in a different way. This is also reflected in the previous literature, which suggests that reporting to other professional entities and/or disclosing to friends or family members are more common help-seeking behaviors among cyberstalking victims (Fissel 2021) and victims of other forms of crime (e.g., Langton et al. 2012). Additional research has revealed that stalking victims specifically noted that their situation could be resolved without needing to involve the police

([Fernández-Cruz 2021](#)). While any disclosure can be beneficial to the victim, the lack of reporting to law enforcement restricts any involvement from the criminal justice system.

Interestingly, about one in three cyberstalking victims indicated that they did not report their experiences because they did not believe the police would do anything, and one in three did not believe the police would be helpful. What is unknown, however, is why respondents had these perceptions about law enforcement. One potential explanation for this is that respondents had reported cyberstalking experiences previously and did not receive adequate police response (see [Ngo 2019](#)). In one study, findings suggested that most victims of stalking had a negative experience with respect to how the criminal justice system responded to their stalking experiences, with many noting that they were specifically told that the criminal justice system could not do anything for them ([Melton 2004](#)). It is imperative that public perceptions related to the police's role in cyberstalking cases are improved so that more victims come forward.

Moreover, it is vital to address perceptions held among law enforcement personnel related to (cyber)stalking cases and their role in investigating cyber-based offenses. Research has found that law enforcement officers who did not have experience with charging stalking cases—compared to those who did—were more likely to perceive stalking to be less dangerous and a difficult crime to prove in court ([Lynch and Logan 2015](#); see also [Weller et al. 2013](#)). Further, research on police perceptions of cybercrime suggests that law enforcement officers are unaware of the various terms and definitions related to cybercrime ([Hadlington et al. 2021](#), and those who hold negative views towards cybercrime perceive it to be less important and less severe (e.g., [Holt et al. 2019](#); [Senjo 2004](#)). Moreover, one study found that only 18% of their sample of law enforcement officers believed they should be responsible for responding to and investigating cybercrimes ([Bossler and Holt 2012](#)). To address this, law enforcement officers should receive mandatory education and training on cyberstalking to improve their ability to identify instances of cyberstalking and appropriately charge a suspect ([Lynch and Logan 2015](#)).

While only endorsed by a small number of cyberstalking victims, it is important to note that nearly 11% did not report their experiences to law enforcement because they were afraid of their cyberstalker, which is slightly higher than what was found in [Morgan and Truman's \(2022\)](#) study. This has been identified as a reason for not reporting to law enforcement for other crime types ([Singer 1988](#)), including domestic violence and intimate partner violence victims ([Felson et al. 2002](#); [Langton et al. 2012](#)). Given the finding that (cyber)stalking is often perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner (e.g., [Morgan and Truman 2022](#); [Smith et al. 2022](#)), this finding is not surprising. It also further reiterates that cyberstalking is a serious crime with real-world associated harms.

The second research question guiding the current study was as follows: are there gender differences in cyberstalking victims' reasons for not reporting? Based on the chi-square tests for independence, women and another gender identity, relative to men, more frequently endorsed the reason that they "thought the police would not do anything". Previous literature has found that crime victims' perceptions of law enforcement are largely dependent upon their previous experiences and interactions. Interestingly, research on the impact of gender on perceptions of police is inconclusive, with some finding men having less favorable perceptions of police (e.g., [Engel 2005](#)), while others found no statistically significant differences between men and women (e.g., [Bradford et al. 2009](#); [Pollock and Menard 2015](#)). It is important that the reason "thought the police would not do anything" is further unpacked in future research to understand what this means, as it may not be related to perceptions of legitimacy, trust, or satisfaction with the police (instead, it could be related to criminal justice system constraints, such as jurisdictional issues, noncomprehensive laws, etc.).

The third research question investigated was as follows: are there racial differences in cyberstalking victims' reasons for not reporting? The current study did not reveal any statistically significant racial differences. Given previous findings, such as that Black males and females, relative to White males, were more likely to perceive the police to be

illegitimate (Cochran and Warren 2012), additional findings suggesting that non-White groups are less trusting of and satisfied with police compared to White individuals (Pryce and Gainey 2022), and victim reporting differences across race (Rennison et al. 2011), more research is needed in this area.

Limitations and Future Research

While the current study adds to the research on the reporting behaviors of cyberstalking victims, there are limitations that should be noted. First, respondents were presented with a short list of potential reasons why they did not report their cyberstalking victimization to law enforcement. While participants were given the option to write in their own reasoning (under “Other, please specify”), the list was limited. Future research would benefit from conducting research in this area using a qualitative approach to allow cyberstalking victims to explain in their own words—rather than selecting response options on a survey—why they chose to not report their experiences to law enforcement. Moreover, a qualitative approach would allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions to obtain further information about the reason for not reporting (e.g., why a respondent thinks the police would not do anything).

A second limitation is that the current study utilized a sample comprised of MTurk aged 18 to 25 years old. As work on MTurk is voluntary, there may be a self-selection bias. With that said, MTurk samples have been found to be at least as representative of the United States population when compared to traditional internet samples (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Paolacci et al. 2010) and more representative than traditional college student samples (Berinsky et al. 2012; Sheehan and Pitman 2016), which are often used in victimization research. It is also important to note that some research has found that young individuals are more likely to have negative attitudes towards law enforcement (e.g., Bridenball and Jesilow 2008; Smith and Hawkins 1973). Thus, it is unclear if reporting behaviors, and reasons for not reporting, would be similar in a study of older cyberstalking victims. Overall, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population, and future research is needed to determine if the current findings extend to other samples. Third, given the low base rates, gender identity and race had to be dichotomized. Future researchers should seek to gather larger, more representative samples in order to be able to further explore the nuances in reasons for not reporting across a wider range of gender or racial identities.

5. Conclusions

Taken together, the current study reveals that the overwhelming majority of cyberstalking victims do not report their experiences to law enforcement, with the most commonly identified reason for this being that they did not know their experiences were criminal. In order to address these two primary findings, a two-pronged approach should be taken. The first step is to focus on increasing reporting among those who experience cyberstalking victimization. While women and another gender identity (compared to men) more frequently endorsed the reason that they “thought the police would not do anything” as an explanation for not reporting their cyberstalking victimization to law enforcement, no other gender or racial differences were observed in the data. As such, educational and awareness programs aimed at the broader community would likely be effective as a method to increase reporting. Within these programs, it is important to teach individuals what constitutes cyberstalking, along with what steps they need to pursue in order to obtain criminal justice system responses.

The second step is to improve the criminal justice response once a cyberstalking incident is reported. Stalking and cyberstalking cases are dramatically under-recorded by the criminal justice system (Brady and Nobles 2017) due to a lack of awareness and/or skills in recognizing and investigating cyberstalking, jurisdictional and statutory limitations, and difficulties obtaining online evidence (Chang 2020). As such, law enforcement needs to be given the resources to appropriately process cases of cyberstalking once they are reported. Police inaction to reported cases of cyberstalking will likely discourage victims

from reporting any form of future victimization and could compromise the safety of the victim (Ngo 2019). In short, these findings reveal that there is significant work that needs to be done to encourage cyberstalking victims to report to law enforcement so that they can obtain the resources needed to recover from their harmful experiences and so that perpetrators are held accountable for their behaviors.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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