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# **Technology-Facilitated Abuse in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV): An Exploration of Costs and Consequences**

## **Award #2020-R2-CX-0003**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Background**

Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) involves tools such as texting, mobile applications, smart devices, telecommunications networks, and social networks to bully, harass, stalk, or intimidate another person. In many cases, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows, often in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). Perpetrators exploit the reach, connectivity, and anonymity of information technology services to commit a wide range of cybercrimes targeting specific individuals that can violate the victim's privacy rights, sense of well-being, and have a lasting, damaging impact on their lives. Victims of cybercrimes may also suffer financial harm – such as lost earnings, purchasing new software or hardware to prevent further harm, or expenditures on mental and/or physical health care. Little is known about the extent of these financial harms. The purpose of this study was to assess the costs and consequences associated with three types of TFA - cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and doxing. The study also estimated the prevalence of these crimes in a nationally representative survey, as well as measured the public's willingness-to-pay to reduce these crimes.

#### **Methods**

The initial stage of the project included an extensive literature review of both the prevalence and consequences of cyberstalking, IBSA, and doxing. Based on the literature review and interviews with an advisory panel that included service provider professionals, subject matter experts, and survivor-advocates, a comprehensive taxonomy of harms was developed. In consultation with the advisory panel, a detailed questionnaire was developed and sent to members of the IPSOS KnowledgePanel. The survey was fielded in November 2022 and resulted in a nationally representative weighted sample of 2,521 respondents from English and Spanish speaking U.S. adults aged 18 or older.

#### **Findings**

Part 1 of the survey focused on prevalence. Over the previous 12-months, we estimate 1.8% [95%CI 1.3-2.4%] of U.S. adults were the victim of cyberstalking; 1.8% [95%CI 1.3-2.4%] doxing; and 1.1% [95%CI 0.5-1.5%] IBSA. However, 1.6% [95%CI 1.1-2.3%] of adults were victimized by 2 or more of these offenses. Overall, 3.9% [95%CI 3.2-4.8%] of adults were estimated to have been victimized by at least one of these 3 crimes in the previous 12 months. Lifetime prevalence was reported to be 7.4% [95%CI 6.4-8.6%] for cyberstalking; 5.4% [95%CI 4.5-6.5%] for doxing; 7.7% [95%CI 6.6-8.9%] for IBSA; 3.7% [95%CI 3.0-4.7%] for poly-victimization and 16.0% [95%CI 14.5-17.6%] over all three crimes.

Part 2 of the survey was administered to anyone who reported a previous TFA victimization (n=403). Victims were asked a series of qualitative and quantitative questions

about harms they experienced: 11.7% reported some type of property value loss including vandalized, stolen or destroyed property; 8.9% reportedly moved from their homes following victimization; 28.6% incurred expenses for purchasing new technology and/or software for protection; 8.3% reported out-of-pocket medical costs; while 10.7% reported mental health costs. About 25% of victims reported that they were students at sometime during their victimization – with 12.7% of them incurring lost tuition or fees. 57% of victims reported they were employed at some point during victimization; 13.6% of them took unpaid days off; 13.0% were fired or quit their job; and 9.1% reportedly took lower paying jobs.

The average out-of-pocket costs to victims of these three TFA crimes was estimated to be \$8,874 – with more than half this amount (\$4,539) being lost earnings. Poly-victims incurred the highest average cost (\$24,848), followed by doxing victims (\$5,332), cyberstalking (\$4,264), and IBSA (\$3,113). These estimates are conservative as they only include costs as of the survey date (but do include an estimate of 1-year income when the respondent was currently unemployed or had taken a lower-paying job). In addition, medical and mental health expenses will inevitably be higher as nearly 40% of victims reported they were still receiving (or expected to receive) treatment in the future. None of these costs include insurance co-payments, paid leave, government or nonprofit agency assistance, or costs incurred by family or friends.

In addition to the monetized harms, we asked a series of questions about intangible costs that were not monetized. For example, of those victims who were employed at some point during their victimization, 37.6% reported having a hard time focusing on their jobs, while 64.6% of students reported a hard time focusing on their studies and 37.1% reported missing some days of school. Over all victims, 55.7% reported feeling “anxious, sad, unsafe, or trapped,” 33.0% had physical health problems (e.g., lack of sleep, nausea – although only 10.1% reported some form of medical care); 22.8% reported that others blamed them for their victimization; 13.6% reported suicidal ideation (although only 11.9% reportedly received some mental health care treatment); 11.3% reported having lost support from family or friends; and 6.5% reported they had developed (or worsened) a substance dependency.

Part 3 of the survey was administered to all respondents – regardless of prior victimization. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their willingness-to-pay for government programs designed to reduce or mitigate the harm from TFA crimes. On average, the typical individual was willing to pay between \$75 and \$85 annually to reduce each of the three crime types. When averaged over the entire population, these figures translate into an estimated willingness-to-pay to reduce one TFA incident ranging from about \$3,500 to \$6,500.

Finally, when asked to rank the relative importance of taxpayer spending to address TFA, the highest ranked was tougher punishment, followed by victim assistance and more secure technology. Educational programs to either prevent such abusive behavior or to protect oneself from becoming a victim were given lower priority.

## **Discussion**

Although the study originally focused on TFA within the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), approximately 60% of IBSA and cyberstalking victims—and over 80% of

doxing victims—reported the perpetrator was someone other than a current or former intimate partner. The final study results include all victims – regardless of victim-offender relationship. Further analysis of the survey data may reveal differences across victim-offender relationships.

Women were significantly more likely to experience each of the TFA measures compared to males; and non-cisgender respondents were more likely to be victimized relative to both cisgender males and females. White respondents were the least likely to be victimized across all TFA measures except cyberstalking. Conversely, multiracial or ‘other’ race respondents were most likely to experience each TFA measure. Straight respondents were less likely to experience cyberstalking, doxing, and any victimization relative to those who identify as gay/lesbian, bisexual, or another orientation. However, gay/lesbian respondents were least likely to experience IBSA, while bisexual respondents were least likely to experience poly-victimization.

Monetary costs were highly skewed with the median victim incurring little or no financial costs. The 90<sup>th</sup> percentile out-of-pocket costs were estimated to be \$1,750 for IBSA, \$4,833 for doxing, \$11,233 for cyberstalking, and \$75,535 for poly-victimization. The 95<sup>th</sup> percentile was estimated to be \$18,482 for IBSA, \$7,833 for doxing, \$16,177 for cyberstalking, and \$153,000 for poly-victimization. Two victims reported out-of-pocket costs in excess of \$400,000.

Previous studies of the public’s willingness-to-pay for crime reduction policies estimate the implied willingness-to-pay to reduce one victimization to be significantly higher than the financial costs of crime. We find the opposite here - the implied willingness-to-pay to reduce a TFA crime is less than the sum of victim costs. Based on open-ended survey responses explaining their choice on the survey, several possible reasons emerged. Some respondents did not feel personally at risk, while others noted victims should take responsibility to be careful to avoid victimization. Others noted the overall risk level for these crimes seemed small, and perpetrators should pay through fines or other means.

Further analysis of respondent’s willingness-to-pay revealed several interesting findings. First, women and Hispanics were generally willing to pay more than men and non-Hispanics, as were those who reported they regularly check and/or post social media. These groups are also at higher risk for victimization. Those aged 60+ were found to be willing to pay less – consistent with their lower risk of victimization. Surprisingly, prior victims were **not** willing to pay more than non-victims. One possible reason for this finding is that the typical victim suffers no financial costs (i.e., only 40% of victims reported costs greater than zero). Alternatively, prior victims might have taken further precautions and believe they are now at lower risk, and/or that these precautions should be taken by a larger percentage of the population.

Additional insights from the willingness-to-pay survey came from follow-up questions. About 55% of respondents believe tech companies should pay for programs to reduce TFA (whether through lower profits or higher prices), while 27.5% believe the burden should be on taxpayers. The remaining 18% indicated various parties should pay – such as a combination of taxpayers and companies, perpetrators (through higher fines), and victims themselves (although this was a small minority of respondents).