

A High-Tech Twist on Abuse

*Sarah Tucker
Toby Cremer
Cynthia Fraser
Cindy Southworth*

*Corresponding Author
Sarah Tucker
Safety Net: the National Safe and Strategic
Technology Project of The National Network to
End Domestic Violence
660 Pennsylvania Ave, SE, Suite 303
Washington, DC 20003
phone: 202-543-5566
fax: 202-543-5626
e-mail: safetynet@nmedv.org*

Technology allows us to type a patient's name into a database and instantly see her medical history and past visits. We can have our telephone continue to auto-dial a busy number while we complete other paperwork. Better yet, we can leave a voice mail or answering machine message asking the other party to return our phone call. We can alert the public about upcoming health fairs and free screenings through an e-newsletter or email list.

In fact, 68% of Americans regularly use the Internet (Pew Internet, 2005), and 80% of them have searched for health information online (Pew Internet, 2005). Typing the words "domestic violence" and "hospital" into a search engine returns over 2 million hits in just three-tenths of a second. The Digital Age has brought us a wide range of technologies that make our lives easier and our services to our patients more efficient and more complete. However, technology can also bring heightened risks to our patients, especially those dealing with domestic and sexual violence. Since healthcare

professionals are often a victim's first point of contact, it is important that the healthcare field stay abreast of new technologies and how they relate to domestic violence.

The tactics of perpetrators are the same---abusing power to gain and maintain control, but everyday more advanced technologic tools make stalking easier and more effective. The increasingly affordable and available variety of phone, surveillance, and computer technologies provide a wide array of dangerous tools for abusers to use to harass, intimidate, and stalk their current and former intimate partners. Some abusers install global positioning systems to track their victim's real-time location with extraordinary accuracy, while others use telephones to leave hundreds of messages in a single day. Other stalkers use technologies like Caller ID during a relationship to monitor their partner's calls, and to locate her after she has fled. Still others use online databases, electronic records, and web search engines to locate, track, and harass former partners.

How Are Abusers Using Technology?

- Abusers continue to identify and adapt new computer software and hardware tools to further stalk and harass their victims. They not only use low-technology monitoring options such as viewing the website browser history or intercepting email, but also are increasingly using more sophisticated SpyWare software and hardware for surveillance. In September 2001, a Michigan man

was charged with installing spy software on the computer of his estranged wife. Without her knowledge, the SpyWare program sent him regular emails reporting all of her computer activity, including all emails sent and received and all web sites visited (Wendland, 2001).

- Abusers and stalkers have used the fax header on faxed documents to locate their partners. In one example, a woman fled, but had to send papers to her abusive partner. She faxed the papers from the shelter fax machine to her attorney. Her attorney faxed the papers to his attorney. His attorney gave the papers to him. Since no one removed the fax header, the abuser acquired the phone number and location of his partner and she had to relocate again.
- Abusers also impersonate survivors by using their TeleTypewriter (TTY's) to seek information about their activities. In one case a prosecutor working with a deaf survivor got a call on his TTY, allegedly from the survivor, reading, "If you don't drop the charges against my boyfriend, I'm going to kill myself." When help was sent to the survivor's home it emerged that she had been sleeping when the TTY call was made. The abuser had impersonated the survivor in an attempt to persuade the prosecutor to withdraw charges.
- Abusers are using email and instant messages to threaten survivors and impersonate them.

One abuser changed his wife's email password and sent threatening messages to himself from her email account. Then he took the printed messages to the police and asked them to arrest her.

- Stalkers are setting up websites that threaten survivors or encourage others to contact, harass, or harm the survivor. For example, one abuser had his parental rights terminated when his child was a toddler. Years later he posted a very old family photograph and details about his then ten-year-old child. The mother and child were terrified to discover the presence and content of this website.

How Are Survivors Benefiting From Technology?

Though technology can be intimidating, it also facilitates a wide range of possibilities and help for survivors. The Internet has brought an entirely new realm of tools, opportunities, and experiences for survivors. Some survivors are using the Internet to find resources, seek help, and rebuild their lives, while others have created their own websites to tell their stories or to give advice to others. Survivors map roads to new lives on the Web by reaching out to shelters, researching restraining orders, and finding housing and employment opportunities. Real-time and portable technology such as email and instant messaging have made it easier for survivors to communicate with family and friends while fleeing an abuser. The recent increase in the popularity of chat rooms, forums, and blogs has been evident too, as more survivors use these as vehicles to share their stories and seek

support. While technology provides many benefits for survivors, it is important to remember that everything from searching for a shelter online to filling out an internet-based assessment tool could be dangerous if the abuser has remote or onsite access to the survivor's computer. When educated about technology, survivors can strategically use it to increase their safety:

- One survivor in Virginia purchased a cell phone and gave that number only to her ex-husband for visitation arrangements. A judge held the abuser accountable when the cell phone and billing records documented hundreds of hang-up calls on a phone only the abuser knew about, a clear violation of her restraining order.
- After being kidnapped by her ex-boyfriend, one woman was able to discreetly use the text messaging feature on her cell phone to alert a friend, who called 911.
- The Internet offers the perception of anonymity to a survivor who is not quite ready to disclose her/his story, but is in the early stages of searching for information and help. Since online communications may not be legally confidential or actually anonymous, survivors may want to use a computer at the library.
- Survivors are taking advantage of life-saving wireless phone donation programs to call for help and reach out to other support systems with free airtime provided by the Wireless Foundation and Verizon Wireless. Additionally, prepaid cell phones make it easy for a survivor to have an anonymous way that she can be contacted and be able to contact

her support system from anywhere.

- Survivors are using extremely affordable and accessible answering machines and voicemail to document harassing messages left by their perpetrators.
- Deaf survivors are using web-based video messaging services to converse with service providers in American Sign Language.
- Survivors are installing security cameras to increase their sense of safety and provide evidence of their abuser violating a restraining order.

What Resources Exist?

Responding to the stories of countless survivors and anticipating the inevitable emergence of many more, the National Network to End Domestic Violence Fund (NNEDV) launched Safety Net: the National Safe and Strategic Technology Project in 2002. While endeavoring to influence policies that hold batterers accountable, the project focuses on educating survivors and their advocates on how to use all forms of technology safely and on how perpetrators are misusing technology to further harm their victims. The project encourages technology innovators to create safety nets for survivors and encourages policy makers to create strong and responsible guidelines as our society struggles to integrate rapidly expanding technology into our daily lives. Safety Net works to equip communities with this knowledge by focusing on three specific areas – providing training and assistance, raising public awareness, and impacting public policy.

Providing Training and Assistance

Trainings presented by the Safety Net Team draw from many survivor experiences to illustrate the safety risks and benefits of phone, imaging, mapping, Internet, and computer technologies including webcams, Global Positioning Systems (GPS), email, TTY, computer histories, wireless networks, Personal Digital Assistant (PDA's) and SpyWare. Additionally, the Safety Net Team responds to approximately 100 requests for "Technical Assistance" each month, totaling over 3,500 requests since 2002. Survivors, local hotline advocates, healthcare professionals, law enforcement, attorneys, and others call or email for information and assistance on technology issues.

As Safety Net continues to educate survivors and advocates about technology usage and safety, the Project is building a nation of tech-savvy advocates. This "training of trainers" model begins by building the capacity of state domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions. Through the annual Training of Trainers conference, education materials, and ongoing support throughout the year, Safety Net supports state level advocates as they, in turn, use their newly acquired technology knowledge to branch out and train each of the local domestic violence service providers in their state. By replicating the national Safety Net Project on a smaller scale in their state and local communities, state coalitions promote the goal of providing every advocate in the country with the knowledge and materials they need to safely and effectively help survivors harness the benefits of technology.

To date, Safety Net has trained over 12,000 advocates, police officers, and prosecutors who are now disseminating this information to others in their

communities in an effort to save and transform lives on the front lines.

Raising Public Awareness

Since domestic violence cuts across all professions, communities, and income levels, and since many survivors use family and friends rather than hotline services, the Safety Net Project works proactively with media outlets to carry the message about safe and strategic use of technology to all survivors. In order to support ongoing public education efforts through the media, Safety Net has published over 40 reports and articles in the past year (NNEDV, 2005).

Impacting Public Policy

Safety Net recognizes that educating the public on the benefits of technology is not enough. Public policy and community practices must protect survivors. To that end, Safety Net continues to be the national voice for technology policy issues affecting survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and stalking. Safety Net effectively advocates for survivor safety and confidentiality by participating in national symposiums and workgroups on crime victimization, and responding to requests for assistance with technology stalking, SpyWare and privacy issues from policy makers at local, state, and national levels.

As electronic access to court and public records increases, Safety Net works to ensure protections for survivors of domestic violence. As criminal justice agencies strengthen their coordinated response, Safety Net advocates for careful and secure sharing of abuser data while protecting victim information. Safety Net works to ensure address confidentiality programs are appropriately implemented and communities are aware of existing

protocols for voters enrolled in these programs. Through leadership, education, and outreach, Safety Net strives to remain ahead of the curve, ensuring that both strategies and methods remain current, effective, and innovative.

The Future of High Tech Abuse

As much as technology has changed society, abusers' motives remain the same: to stalk, harass, and intimidate their partners in order to gain power and control in their relationships. As Safety Net works to educate survivors and colleagues, expand safety planning to include technology, and collaborate with local community systems, we recognize that as technology continues to develop and abusers adapt to these changes, and hence the response of advocates must change as well. Our challenge is to remain one step ahead of abusers and anticipate ways they will misuse technology, while we creatively and strategically adapt technology to benefit survivors.

Increased online data collection, biometrics, and radio frequency identification chips are just a few of the new technologies that present additional challenges for survivors. Additionally, the increase in online databases makes it easier than ever to locate personal information about others. This breach of privacy is invasive and annoying to most of us, as we worry about identity theft and exposing our personal details to data brokers, insurance companies, and anyone else surfing the web. For survivors of domestic violence, this violation of privacy can be deadly.

We know that continuing to work within the healthcare system, community social services, and with other civic organizations is crucial to ensuring our

message gets to those who need to hear it most. While much is unknown about the future of technology and how perpetrators may use and misuse these tools, advocates and allies must continue to press on – learning, educating, and advocating for change.

Safety Net: the National Safe and Strategic Technology Project of NNEDV is a resource for both providers and survivors. To find the contact information for your state's domestic violence coalition, download handouts to help plan for safety around technology, and learn more about high tech stalking and the Safety Net project, visit Safety Net's website at www.nnedv.org/SafetyNet

References

Pew Internet and American Life Project. Retrieved August 31, 2005 from www.pewinternet.org/trends/Internet_Activities_8.05.05.htm

Pew Internet and American Life Project. Retrieved August 31, 2005 from www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/156/report_display.asp

Wendland, M. (2001, September 6). State targets cyber spies: Belleville man accused of electronic voyeurism. Detroit Free Press. Retrieved August 31, 2005, from www.freep.com/money/tech/spy6_20010906.htm

See www.nnedv.org/safetynet for more information, and click "In the News" in the left column.