

# The Danish Police's Response to Stalking: An Exploration of Victim Perspectives

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## Abstract

**Background:** This study aimed to investigate the experiences of Danish help-seeking stalking victims who had been in contact with the police, or decided not to contact them, within the timeframe of 2015–2023.

**Methods:** This cross-sectional study used two datasets collected by the Danish Stalking Center in 2015–2020 and 2020–2023, respectively. In total, 1,019 respondents were included in the analyses.

**Results:** Most stalking victims were women (88.8 per cent), a mean age of 38.9 years (SD = 11.34). Most had been in contact with the police (56.3 per cent), but a large number did not report stalking, fearing escalation (35 per cent), lack of energy (30.9 per cent) or due to the belief that the police could not help (34 per cent). Overall, 45.9 per cent of participants were satisfied with law enforcement's competence in handling their stalking case. Linear regression analysis showed that those stalked by an acquaintance or a stranger reported a more positive perception of the police's competence ( $p < .05$ ) compared to victims of intimate partner stalking. Logistic regression uncovered regional differences in the types of stalking behaviours experienced by victims.

**Conclusion:** This study highlights an important issue that has received relatively little attention in Denmark. The findings suggest there is a need for improved police responses and support services for stalking victims in Denmark.

## Keywords

Stalking, victims, trauma, police, justice

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## Introduction

There is no unequivocal definition and operationalization that can define stalking as a phenomenon across different contexts. This is partly because stalking is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, and partly because there is a difference between whether the definition is used in connection with legislation, research or clinical support efforts. A behavioural definition provides a basis for scientific research and enhances knowledge of the issue, while a legal definition defines criminal behaviour and provides a framework for prosecution. In Denmark, the most commonly used definition of stalking from a behavioural viewpoint is the one proposed by the Danish Stalking Center (DSC), which we will adhere to in this study: 'Stalking is a systematic series of contact attempts and behavior which are unwanted and persistent and which is experienced as border transgressing and intimidating for the victim' (Dansk Stalking Center, 2021). Estimates of the lifetime prevalence of stalking range from 2 to 29 per cent for men and 7 to 36 per cent for women (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2004), depending on the definition of stalking and the inclusion criteria applied to the study sample. Based on a national representative study of 6,405 Danes aged 18–74 years, it was estimated that 8.9 per cent of the Danish population were victimized by stalking at some point in their lives (Jørgensen, 2013). As in other countries, it appears that in Denmark, more women (11.7 per cent) than men (6.2 per cent) become victims of stalking during their lifetime (Jørgensen, 2013).

Stalking laws have been established globally over the past few decades, beginning in English-speaking countries in the early 1990s. Initially, these laws were enacted in response to high-profile murders where the victim was stalked prior to their death (Mullen et al., 2009). The aim was to equip law enforcement with the ability to prevent violence and assaults by criminalizing behaviour that did not fit under other criminal offences. More recently, the focus of anti-stalking laws has shifted towards preventing the psychological harm caused by persistent and unwanted intrusions (McEwan et al., 2007).

Denmark criminalized stalking-like behaviour in 1933, emerging as the first European country to do so (De Fazio, 2009; Kyvsgaard, 2007; Rigsdagen, 1930). The subsequent amendments in 1965, 2004 and 2012 aimed to address the inadequacies of previous legislation, particularly in prosecuting severe instances (Hurwitz & Justitsministeriet, 1971; Justitsministeriet, 2003, 2011). However, until 2022, stalking did not have its own penal code in Denmark but was incorporated into other legislation, notably addressing harassment. Finally, on 1 January 2022, Denmark implemented new specific anti-stalking legislation (Penal Code 242), marking a significant shift as stalking obtained its own dedicated penal code. This new legislation enhances the legal framework and increases penalties for stalking offences (Justitsministeriet, 2021). It broadens the definition of stalking to encompass cyberstalking and includes provisions for restraining orders against the perpetrator, hence allowing for the police to act more quickly in order to protect the victim. From a legal viewpoint, the Danish Penal Code now describes stalking and the penalty as:

Any person who systematically and continuously contacts, pursues or otherwise harasses another person in a manner likely to invade the privacy of the relevant person, is sentenced to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years for stalking. (Justitsministeriet, 2021)

The new legislation is expected to improve the ability of the police to effectively investigate and prosecute stalking cases, as well as provide better protection and support for victims. The year before, in 2021, the Danish police had already introduced new specialized teams across all districts, as they recognized the necessity for a more effective response to various crimes, including stalking (Justitsministeriet, 2020). These teams, comprising civilian experts and police officers, were established to enhance and optimize responses to domestic violence, rape, stalking and honour-based crimes. Despite these concerted efforts to improve the Danish criminal justice system's responsiveness to stalking cases, it is crucial to recognize that their implementation and efficiency hinge on various factors. These factors encompass the level of training and resources available to the police, the willingness of victims to report incidents, and the overall effectiveness of the criminal justice system. As of now, there has been no official evaluation to assess whether any anti-stalking initiative or legislation in Denmark effectively aids or protects stalking victims.

Regrettably, authors from other Western countries have observed that anti-stalking legislation in their respective countries has not achieved the intended outcomes in addressing the problem of stalking (Taylor-Dunn et al., 2017). Among other statistics, this is evident from their varying police satisfaction rates and victim reports. For instance, Taylor-Dunn et al.'s (2021) examination of 35 British stalking victims illustrated a prevailing trend of inadequate police responses, characterized by inaction, inappropriate actions and victims feeling blamed or not taken seriously, despite stalking being recognized as a crime in 2012. These findings align with other research across the United States, the United Kingdom, Australasia and Europe, emphasizing the substantial hurdles victims encounter when reporting their experiences to the police. Studies consistently show that victims often feel they are not taken seriously, encounter insensitive responses and may face victim-blaming (Baum et al., 2009; Galeazzi et al., 2009; Korkodeilou, 2014; Melton, 2004; Sheridan et al., 2001; van der Aa & Groenen, 2010; Villacampa & Pujols, 2019; Worsley et al., 2017). In the United Kingdom, a study found that despite the recognition of stalking as a crime, a larger minority of victims (39 per cent) reported poor police responses (Budd & Mattinson, 2000). In the United States, victims expressed mixed feelings, with 46 per cent reporting satisfaction and 35 per cent dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system's response to stalking incidents (Baum et al., 2009). Similarly, in Spain, nearly half of the victims perceived reporting as effective, while 21.2 per cent felt it was not effective at all (Villacampa & Pujols, 2019).

In 2020, a Danish police survey delved into satisfaction among crime victims, unveiling an overall satisfaction rate of 60 per cent, with 20 per cent reporting dissatisfaction. Victims of violence and rape registered the highest dissatisfaction

rates (34 and 47 per cent, respectively), while those affected by burglary exhibited the highest satisfaction (70 per cent). Regardless of crime type, victims emphasized the pivotal role of having their report taken seriously by the police for overall satisfaction. However, 13 per cent of crime victims felt their report was not taken seriously, particularly victims of violence and rape (21 per cent and 22 per cent, respectively). Notably, those who did feel their report was taken seriously were five times more likely to be satisfied. The relationship between overall satisfaction and case conviction was weak, and satisfaction varied across police districts, ranging from 54 to 77 per cent, with a tendency for higher satisfaction in the western part of Denmark (North Denmark Region, Central Region and South Region) compared to the eastern part (Region Zealand, The Capital Region) (Rigspolitiet, 2020).

Shifting instead our focus to the perspective of law enforcement, researchers have explored police perceptions of stalking, specifically delving into the attitudes of police officers toward this issue. Weller et al. (2013) presented police and nonpolice participants in the United Kingdom with stalking vignettes differing on the victim–offender relationship and found that both police and nonpolice participants perceived the scenario to be more similar to stalking when the victim and offender were strangers versus acquaintances or ex-intimates (Weller et al., 2013). Therefore, instances of ex-partner stalking are likely to pose unique challenges for police officers. They may encounter difficulty distinguishing stalking from domestic violence or relationship issues, potentially resulting in inadequate or no police response (Lynch & Logan, 2015). And, even if they correctly identify a case as stalking, police willing to assist could be hindered by the absence of sufficient evidence to act upon. Finally, a lack of specialized training can contribute to inadequate responses in criminal justice. As such, legislation alone does not always suffice in guiding frontline officers, which in many cases just goes on to prolong the distress and trauma already experienced by the victims (Lynch & Logan, 2015).

## **Current Study**

In light of the advancements in Danish anti-stalking legislation and the continuous specialization of the Danish police force, it remains crucial to closely examine the experiences of stalking victims in their interactions with the criminal justice system, especially frontline police officers, seeing they act as gatekeepers for further proceedings. In this context, this study aims to investigate the experiences of Danish stalking victims who sought assistance from the police, or made the decision not to seek help, within the timeframe of 2015–2023. Understanding these experiences is paramount in evaluating the system's effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement. Consequently, this research represents a crucial step towards comprehending the dynamics of how Danish law enforcement engages with and supports stalking victims, contributing to the broader discourse on the responsiveness of the criminal justice system to this pressing issue.

## Methods

### *Procedure and Participants*

The data used in this study are composed of two datasets collected in 2015–2020 and 2020–2023, respectively. The 2015–2020 dataset was collected by the DSC from mid-2015 to October 2020 through a survey questionnaire developed in collaboration with The National Center for Psychotraumatology, Denmark. Prior to the beginning of the project, the DSC had an established procedure for securing informed written consent in connection with the collection and storage of questionnaire responses. All participants who filled in the questionnaire gave consent for the data to be used in connection with the research. The questionnaire was sent to all victims of stalking who received professional intervention from the DSC in the years 2015–2020. The questionnaire was sent prior to every participant's first therapy session and distributed via email where the participant received a link together with a unique user ID. Answering the questionnaire was a prerequisite for receiving therapy. In total, 543 responses from this dataset were included in the analysis.

The 2020–2023 dataset was collected by the DSC in the period October 2020–April 2023 through a revised version of the prior 2015–2020 survey questionnaire. The procedures and requirements, including obtaining consent and questionnaire distribution, remained consistent with the earlier dataset collection methodology. A total of 476 responses from this dataset were included in the analysis. As such, a final count of 1,019 responses was included in the analysis.

## Measures

### *Demographics and Stalking Characteristics*

Both datasets included data about gender, age and occupational status and the participants' region of residence. In the 2020–2023 revised questionnaire, the DSC included a question about annual household income. Thus, this information is not included in the 2015–2020 data. For both datasets, information about the characteristics of the stalking was collected. This included information about the types of stalking behaviour experienced, the relation between the victim and the stalker and the duration of stalking. Dataset 2020–2023 included data about the respondents' sense of security in relation to the stalking. Here, the participants were asked: 'To what extent do you feel that you are afraid for your own safety on a scale from 1 to 10?'. A higher score indicated a greater level of fear.

### *Victims' Experience with the Police*

Both datasets included questions about whether the participant had been in contact with police in relation to the stalking, and if so, what their experiences with

the police were. First, participants were asked: 'Have you had contact with the police in connection to the stalking campaign? (Yes/No)'. If no, participants were asked:

To what extent was the following important to you in your decision not to contact the police: (a) out of consideration for the stalker (e.g. to ensure a clean criminal record), (b) I had an expectation that the stalking would stop by itself, (c) There was a lack of clear evidence/documentation for the stalking, (d) I was of the belief that the police could not help, (e) I don't trust the police, (f) I feared the stalking would escalate, (g) I didn't have the energy that was needed and (h) I didn't know how to do it.

All questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = 'Not at all important', 2 = 'Slightly important', 3 = 'Moderately important', 4 = 'Very important' and 5 = 'Extremely important'. If participants had been in contact with the police, they were asked: 'To what extent did you experience that the person(s) you had contact with at the police: (a) had knowledge about stalking, (b) guided you in relation to your situation (e.g., about the procedure at the police, legislation, options, etc.) and (c) informed you about your appeal options. All questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = 'Not at all', 2 = 'To a small extent', 3 = 'To some extent', 4 = 'To a moderate extent' and 5 = 'To a large extent'. From these last three questions, an overall binary measure of satisfaction was created: 'satisfied' ('To a large extent', 'To a moderate extent', 'To some extent') and 'dissatisfied' ('To a small extent', 'Not at all'). 'Don't know' was not included in either of the categories. Overall satisfaction was first calculated for each of the three questions separately and then overall taking the average value for each of the two categories across the three questions.

### *Stalking Behaviour*

*Stalking Behaviour Checklist (SBC)*. The 2015–2020 dataset included the SBC to investigate the types of stalking behaviour experienced by the victims. In the SBC (Coleman, 1997), the participant was presented with 26 different types of stalking behaviour, and they were asked to indicate the average frequency of each type of stalking behaviour during the stalking process. Frequency was indicated on a 6-point Likert scale with response options 0 = 'Never', 1 = 'Once a month or less', 2 = 'Two to three times a month', 3 = 'Once or twice a week', 4 = 'Three to six times a week' and 5 = 'Once a day or more'. Cronbach's alpha for the SBC in the present study was 0.83.

*Stalking Assessment Indices–Victimization (SAI-V)*. An adjusted version of the SAI-V developed by McEwan et al. (2021) was included in 2020–2023 in favour of the SBC (McEwan et al., 2021). Of the items included in the final scale, 16 were included from the SAI-V. In addition, 4 items were added from SBC (Coleman, 1997) and 8 items were added by the DSC based on their broad experience with stalking cases and stalking behaviour in Denmark. The participants were asked how many times they had experienced the individual type of stalking

behaviour in total throughout their stalking course with the answer categories 0 = 'Never', 1 = '1 time', 2 = '2 times', 4 = '3–5 times', 5 = '6–10 times', 15 = '11–20 times' and 20 = 'More than 20 times'. Cronbach's alpha for the modified version of the SAI in the present study was 0.83.

Stalking behaviours (including those from the 2015–2020 dataset) were subsequently divided into different categories based on their characteristics. The grouping process involved collaboration between two researchers who jointly categorized stalking behaviours. Subsequently, a third researcher conducted a comprehensive review of the initial categorization. Any disparities or differences in categorization were addressed through dialogue, ensuring a consensus-based approach. As a result, the following categories of stalking behaviours were formed: violence, threats, surveillance, burglary/vandalism and stalking through an authority.

## Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression and multiple logistic regression. Descriptive statistics were used to present demographic characteristics and information about participants' contact with the Danish police, the knowledge of stalking among the police, how the victims were treated when they contacted them and if they received adequate guidance if needed. Multiple linear regression was used to examine the relationship between demographics, stalking characteristics and police competence. Multiple logistic regression was used to examine the likelihood of having experienced five types of stalking behaviour based on the region of residence and stalking duration. For all statistical tests, the significance level was set at 0.05. All analyses were carried out in Stata 18.0 BE.

## Results

The majority of victims were women (88.8 per cent) (Table 1). The average age of the victims was 38.9 years (SD = 11.34), and most of them had children (65.6 per cent). Most victims were employed (45.8 per cent). The Capital Region of Denmark had the largest number of participants (42.6 per cent). A small majority of victims (56.3 per cent) reported having been in contact with the police at the time of the survey (Table 2). Two-thirds of participants (66.9 per cent) reported that their stalker was a former intimate partner, and more than half (56.2 per cent) reported that the stalking campaign had lasted less than a year at the time of the survey. The most frequently reported stalking behaviour was surveillance/following (82.8 per cent), while burglary/vandalism was the least reported group of stalking behaviour (43.4 per cent).

Regarding the victims' experience with the police, Table 3 shows the reasons why some victims surveyed in 2020–2023 did not report the stalking to the police,

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of 1,019 Danish Help-seeking Stalking Victims, 2015–2023.

	2015–2020		2020–2023		Total	
	n/N	Per Cent	n/N	Per Cent	n/N	Per Cent
Gender						
Woman	493/543	90.7	412/476	86.6	905/1,019	88.8
Man	50/543	9.2	64/476	13.4	114/1,019	11.2
Missing	0		0		0	
Age						
Mean (SD)	38.9 (11.28)		38.9 (11.40)		38.9 (11.34)	
Missing	0		0		0	
Children						
Yes	361/538	67.1	304/476	63.9	665/1,014	65.6
No	177/538	32.9	172/476	36.1	349/1,014	34.4
Missing	5		0		5	
Occupation						
Employed	249/522	47.7	208/476	43.7	457/998	45.8
Unemployed/job seeking	40/522	7.6	28/476	5.9	68/998	6.8
Student	67/522	12.8	52/476	10.9	119/998	11.9
Retired	100/522	19.1	112/476	23.5	212/998	21.2
On leave (maternity, sick)/early pensioner	8/522	1.5	11/476	2.3	19/998	1.5
Other	48/522	9.2	65/476	13.7	119/998	11.2
Missing	21		0		21	
Yearly income (EUR)						
< 26.000			117/476	24.6	117/476	24.6
26.000–40.000			89/476	18.7	89/476	18.7
40.000–53.000			77/476	16.2	77/476	16.2
> 53.000			118/476	24.8	118/476	24.8
Do not wish to answer			75/476	15.8	75/476	15.8
Missing			0		0	
Region of residence						
Capital Region of Denmark	254/543	46.7	177/468	37.8	431/1,011	42.6
Region Zealand	116/543	21.3	58/468	12.4	174/1,011	17.2
South Region Denmark	26/543	4.7	93/468	19.9	119/1,011	11.8
Central Region Denmark	57/543	10.5	102/468	21.8	159/1,011	15.7
North Denmark Region	90/543	16.5	38/468	8.1	128/1,011	12.7
Missing	0		8		8	

**Note:** SD = standard deviation.



**Table 2.** Stalking Characteristics of Help-seeking Victims Surveyed in 2015–2023 (N = 1,019).

	n/N	Per Cent
Contact with the police before contact with the Danish Stalking Center		
No	445/1,019	43.67
Yes	574/1,019	56.33
Missing	0	
Relation between victim and stalker		
Intimate	681/1,018	66.9
Acquaintance	184/1,018	18.07
Stanger	153/1,018	15.03
Missing	1	
Duration of stalking		
Less than a year	483/859	56.23
A year or more	376/859	43.77
Missing	160	
Stalking behaviour		
Number of behaviours experienced (mean [SD])	12.66 (5.43)	
Violence		
No	298/1,019	29.24
Yes	721/1,019	70.76
Missing	0	
Threats		
No	508/1,019	49.85
Yes	511/1,019	50.15
Missing	0	
Surveillance/following		
No	175/1,019	17.17
Yes	844/1,019	82.83
Missing	0	
Burglary/vandalism		
No	576/1,019	56.53
Yes	433/1,019	43.47
Missing	0	
Authority stalking*		
No	253/476	53.15
Yes	233/476	46.85
Missing	543	

**Note:** \* Question only a part of dataset 2020–2023.

with 35.0 per cent of respondents reporting that they feared the stalking would escalate if they contacted the police, 30.9 per cent reported that they did not have the energy to do so, and 34.0 per cent reported that they believed the police could not help them. As seen in Table 4, 13.2 per cent of victims surveyed in the years 2020–2023, who had been in contact with the police, reported that the police had extensive knowledge of stalking, 12.2 per cent reported that the police to a large

**Table 3.** 'To What Extent Was the Following Important to You in Your Decision Not to Contact the Police', 2020–2023 (N = 97).

	Don't Know (Per Cent)	Not at All (Per Cent)	To a Small Extent (Per Cent)	To Some Extent (Per Cent)	To a Moderate Extent (Per Cent)	To a Large Extent (Per Cent)
Out of consideration for the stalker (e.g. to ensure a clean criminal record)	20.62	35.05	10.31	10.31	11.34	12.37
I had an expectation that the stalking would stop by itself	11.34	7.22	6.19	24.74	21.65	28.87
There was a lack of clear evidence/ documentation for the stalking	12.37	18.56	8.25	19.59	20.62	20.62
I was of the belief that the police could not help	10.31	11.34	9.28	11.34	23.71	34.02
I don't trust the police	23.71	37.11	13.40	13.40	4.12	8.25
I feared the stalking would escalate	13.40	11.34	7.22	12.37	20.62	35.05
I didn't have the energy that was needed	11.34	12.37	10.31	15.46	19.59	30.93
I didn't know how to approach the police	8.25	29.90	12.37	20.62	7.22	21.65

**Table 4.** 'To What Extent Did You Experience That the Person(s) You Had Contact with at the Police?', 2020–2023 (N = 379).

	Don't Know (Per Cent)	Not at All (Per Cent)	To a Small Extent (Per Cent)	To Some Extent (Per Cent)	To a Moderate Extent (Per Cent)	To a Large Extent (Per Cent)	Dissatisfied* (Per Cent)	Satisfied* (Per Cent)
Had knowledge about stalking	5.28	13.72	21.90	27.18	18.73	13.19	35.62	59.10
Guided you in relation to your situation (e.g. about the procedure at the police, legislation, options, etc.)	1.85	21.96	21.96	24.60	17.46	12.17	43.92	54.23
Informed you about your appeal options	11.14	50	14.10	11.70	7.71	5.05	64.10	24.46

**Note:** \*Does not sum up to 100 per cent as 'Don't know' is not included in the calculation.

extent guided them in relation to their situation (e.g. about the procedure at the police, legislation, options, etc.), and 5.1 per cent reported that they were extensively informed about their appeal options by the police. Overall, a majority of victims were satisfied with the police's knowledge about stalking (59.1 per cent), while most were dissatisfied with the police's ability to inform them about their appeal options (64.1 per cent). Across all three questions, 45.9 per cent of victims expressed overall satisfaction with the police's competence in handling their stalking case, while 47.9 per cent of victims expressed overall dissatisfaction.

Linear regression analysis results are shown in Table 5. The results of the first regression indicated that region of residence, stalking duration and victim-perpetrator relationship explained 4.3 per cent of the variance in perceptions of the police's knowledge about stalking ( $R^2 = 0.043$ ,  $F(7, 346) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .031$ ). Victims who were stalked by acquaintances ( $\beta = 0.428$ ,  $p = .027$ ) or strangers ( $\beta = 0.422$ ,  $p = .038$ ) reported significantly better perceptions of police knowledge about stalking compared to those stalked by former intimate partners. The results of the second regression indicated that region of residence, stalking duration and victim-perpetrator relationship explained 8.1 per cent of the variance in

**Table 5.** Association Between Victim's Experience of Police Competence Within the Mentioned Areas and Region of Residence, Stalking Duration and Victim-Stalker Relationship.

	$\beta$	$R^2$
Had knowledge about stalking		0.04
Region of residence		
The Capitol Region of Denmark	Ref	
Central Region Denmark	-0.139	
North Denmark Region	-0.115	
Region Zealand	-0.233	
South Region Denmark	-0.400	
Stalking duration		
Stalked less than a year	Ref	
Stalked more than a year	0.260	
Victim-perpetrator relationship		
Intimate	Ref	
Acquaintance	0.428*	
Stranger	0.422*	
Guided you in relation to your situation (e.g. about the procedure at the police, legislation, options, etc.)		0.081
Region of residence		
The Capitol Region of Denmark	Ref	
Central Region Denmark	0.019	
North Denmark Region	-0.161	
Region Zealand	-0.048	
South Region Denmark	-0.721*	

(Table 5 continued)

(Table 5 continued)

	$\beta$	$R^2$
Stalking duration		
Stalked less than a year	Ref	
Stalked more than a year	0.437*	
Victim–perpetrator relationship		
Intimate	Ref	
Acquaintance	0.421*	
Stranger	0.417*	
Informed you about your appeal options		0.011
Region of residence		
The Capitol Region of Denmark	Ref	
Central Region Denmark	0.006	
North Denmark Region	-0.085	
Region Zealand	-0.063	
South Region Denmark	-0.231	
Stalking duration		
Stalked less than a year	Ref	
Stalked more than a year	-0.013	
Victim–perpetrator relationship		
Intimate	Ref	
Acquaintance	0.159	
Stranger	0.307	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ .

perceptions of the police's ability to guide victims in stalking cases ( $R^2 = 0.081$ ,  $F(7, 345) = 4.36$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Victims residing in the South Region Denmark reported significantly worse perceptions of the police's ability to guide accordingly compared to victims residing in the Capital Region ( $\beta = -0.768$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Victims who were stalked for more than a year reported significantly more positive perceptions of police competence in this area compared to those stalked for less than a year ( $\beta = 0.437$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Additionally, victims who were stalked by acquaintances ( $\beta = 0.421$ ,  $p = .024$ ) or strangers ( $\beta = 0.417$ ,  $p = .034$ ) reported significantly better perceptions of police's ability to guide accordingly compared to those stalked by intimate partners. There were no significant differences in perception of police competence in informing about appeal options across the included variables ( $R^2 = 0.011$ ,  $F(7, 343) = 0.55$ ,  $p = .796$ ).

A logistic regression analysis of the relationship between types of stalking behaviour experienced by victims and their region of residence and duration of stalking was conducted (Table 6). In comparison to victims residing in the Capital Region of Denmark, respondents from the North Denmark Region were significantly more likely to report having experienced stalking violence (OR = 1.85, 95 per cent CI (1.09; 3.14),  $p = .022$ ), threats (OR = 2.27, 95 per cent CI (1.45; 3.57),  $p = .000$ ) and burglary/vandalism (OR = 1.87, 95 per cent CI (1.21; 2.90),  $p = .005$ ). Victims living in South Region Denmark were more likely to have experienced threats (OR=1.76, 95 per cent CI (1.13; 2.75),  $p = .001$ ) compared to victims

**Table 6.** Logistic Regression of the Association Between Stalking Behaviour Exposure and Region of Residence Adjusted for Stalking Duration at the Time of Survey.

	Violence			Threats			Surveillance/Following			Burglary/Vandalism			Authority Stalking**		
	OR	95% CI	p	OR	95% CI	p	OR	95% CI	p	OR	95% CI	p	OR	95% CI	p
Region of residence															
The Capitol Region of Denmark	1			1			1			1			1		
Central Region Denmark	0.977	(0.641; 1.49)	0.914	1.10	(0.746; 1.62)	.625	1.27	(0.746; 2.15)	.380	1.46	(0.986; 2.16)	.058	1.08	(0.582; 2.02)	.789
North Denmark Region	1.85	(1.09; 3.14)	0.022*	2.27	(1.45; 3.57)	.000*	2.01	(1.02; 3.98)	.044*	1.87	(1.21; 2.90)	.005*	1.42	(0.841; 2.42)	.187
Region Zealand	1.20	(0.775; 1.86)	0.413	1.02	(0.689; 1.51)	.918	1.06	(0.636; 1.76)	.825	1.04	(0.699; 1.55)	.836	1.88	(1.13; 3.13)	.015*
South Region Denmark	1.28	(0.780; 2.10)	0.327	1.76	(1.13; 2.75)	.013*	1.47	(0.788; 2.75)	.225	1.39	(0.895; 2.17)	.141	0.648	(0.297; 1.41)	.276
Stalking duration															
Less than a year	1			1			1			1			1		
A year or more	1.48	(1.09; 2.01)	0.013*	1.50	(1.14; 1.97)	0.004*	1.19	(0.818; 1.73)	.363	1.69	(1.28; 2.23)	.000*	1.67	(1.23; 2.45)	.009*

**Note:** \*p < .05. \*\*Question only a part of dataset 2020–2023. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

living in Capital Region Denmark. Finally, victims from Region Zealand were more likely to have experienced authority stalking (OR=1.88, 95 per cent CI (1.13; 3.13),  $p = .015$ ) than victims living in Capital Region Denmark. With the exception of surveillance/following, those having been stalked for more than a year were significantly more likely to have experienced violence (OR = 1.48, 95 per cent CI (1.09; 2.01),  $p = .013$ ), threats (OR = 1.50, 95 per cent CI (1.14; 1.97),  $p = .004$ ), burglary/vandalism (OR = 1.69, 95 per cent CI (1.28; 2.23),  $p = .000$ ) and authority stalking (OR = 1.67, 95 per cent CI (1.23; 2.45),  $p = .009$ ) compared to victims who had been stalked for less than a year at the time of the survey.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the experiences of Danish stalking victims who have sought help from the police (or decided not to) during the period 2015–2023. Findings revealed the most influencing factors in victims' decisions not to report stalking were concerned about escalation, lack of energy and doubts about police efficacy. While more than half of victims were satisfied with the police's knowledge of stalking and their ability to guide them in their case, a majority expressed dissatisfaction with the police's ability to provide information about their appeal options. Linear regression analyses indicated that victims stalked by acquaintances or strangers tended to be more satisfied with police's knowledge of stalking compared to those stalked by a former intimate partner. Furthermore, victims residing in the South Region Denmark reported less satisfactory police guidance. Logistic regression uncovered regional differences in the types of stalking behaviours experienced by victims.

The study reveals a dissatisfaction rate of 47.9 per cent among stalking victims regarding the overall handling of their cases by the police. Intriguingly, this closely mirrors the dissatisfaction rate of 47 per cent reported by rape victims in the 2020 victim survey conducted by the Danish police (Rigspolitiet, 2020). Given the recent legal categorization of stalking as an act of violence in Denmark, one might have anticipated a closer alignment with the 34 per cent dissatisfaction rate reported by victims of violence in the aforementioned survey. The proportion of dissatisfied stalking victims in this study is likewise higher than what Taylor-Dunn (2017) found among English stalking victims. Although a qualitative study, when asked to rate their overall satisfaction of the criminal justice system on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very), 5 of 14 (35.7 per cent) of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction (Taylor-Dunn et al., 2017). In addition, the proportion of dissatisfied English victims did not change after new anti-stalking legislation (Protection of Freedoms Act in 2012) was put into force in 2012. Although still early days in Denmark, as Taylor-Dunn rightly remarked, this lack of change suggests that a legislative reform has not (yet) been effective.

Logan et al. (2006) proposed another explanation as to why stalking continues to be a challenge for the criminal justice system, for example, stalking often becomes a 'he said, she said' crime, where the value of testimony alone is diminished, making it challenging for law enforcement to investigate. Additionally, the

harms of stalking are often subjective rather than objective, and thus in many cases, the victim must play investigator and evidence collector concurrently, which can be a challenging task. Moreover, the justice system's orientation towards stalking as a crime seems more focused on physical harm rather than psychological harm, leading to the minimization of the terror that stalking causes as well as stalking as a crime (Logan et al., 2006). In relation to this, our study also found that some of the victims surveyed in 2020 and forward did not report the stalking to the police due to fear of escalation or a lack of energy. This finding is also consistent with previous research indicating that police responses to stalking cases can be inadequate and insensitive to the needs of victims (Korkodeilou, 2014; Melton, 2004; Taylor-Dunn et al., 2021; van der Aa & Groenen, 2010). As a result, some victims may feel re-victimized by the criminal justice system and be reluctant to seek further help or report future incidents of stalking. These challenges can lead to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness for the victim and can hinder their ability to access the support and protection they need. This further underscores the possible need for better training and support for law enforcement personnel to recognize and improve their understanding of the seriousness of stalking and its psychological harms.

Concerning the association between victim–stalker relationship and the police's response, the results of the linear regression show that victims of non-intimate stalking (i.e., stalked by acquaintances or strangers) report better perceptions of the police's knowledge and ability to guide them in their stalking cases compared to those who were stalked by former intimate partners. These results are consistent with prior research indicating that police officers may harbour misconceptions about stalking, especially in cases of ex-partner stalking, where the police are less likely to use available stalking legislation (Lynch & Logan, 2015; Weller et al., 2013), which could be rooted in the complexities inherent to interpersonal relationships. In cases of former intimate partners, the blurred lines between stalking, domestic violence and relationship issues may pose challenges for both victims and law enforcement. It is conceivable that victims of non-intimate stalking, involving acquaintances or strangers, may encounter a clearer delineation of the stalking behaviour, facilitating a more targeted and effective police response. Additionally, there might be variations in victims' willingness or ability to communicate pertinent details about their cases, influencing the perceived effectiveness of police intervention (Lynch & Logan, 2015; Weller et al., 2013).

The logistic regression analysis revealed that there are significant differences in the types of stalking behaviours experienced by victims depending on which region they are residing in. There could be several explanations for these differences. One possible explanation is that it could be due to differences in the demographics and population density of the regions. In urban areas characterized by higher population densities, the likelihood of stalking incidents may be elevated due to the increased opportunities for perpetrators to identify potential victims. The anonymity afforded by larger cities further facilitates this process. However, these dynamics in urban settings may also result in more transient and less prolonged stalking campaigns. The inherent nature of urban environments, with stalkers potentially moving on to new targets more swiftly, could curtail the

development of prolonged and gradually escalating stalking behaviours, leading to a more superficial and shorter-lived nature of stalking incidents. Conversely, rural areas might exhibit a different pattern, potentially allowing for a slower evolution and persistence of stalking campaigns over time.

Another thought is that the differences in identifying stalking behaviours between urban and rural police officers may be rooted in their varying degrees of familiarity with stalking statutes. Lynch (2015) suggests that officers who lack knowledge of these laws may face challenges recognizing situations as stalking, potentially prolonging stalking campaigns. This difficulty in early recognition is significant, as other research (e.g., McEwan et al., 2012; Monckton-Smith et al., 2017) indicates that prolonged stalking tends to escalate, becoming more violent over time. In urban areas, characterized by a higher likelihood of adopting new practices swiftly, police officers may have greater exposure to and understanding of evolving legal frameworks, enabling them to identify and respond to stalking incidents more effectively. Oppositely, in rural settings where the diffusion of innovative policing practices might be slower, police officers may grapple with staying abreast of changing legal landscapes, potentially leading to delays in recognizing and addressing stalking behaviours.

Lastly, the regional differences in experienced stalking behaviours may also be influenced by other factors, such as socio-economic status and cultural norms. For example, individuals living in rural regions might have limited access to support networks and resources nearby, which could result in a higher risk of facing more violent types of stalking behaviour. It may also lead to delayed police contact due to the social stigma associated with being a stalking victim. However, without further investigation, it is difficult to draw more definitive conclusions about the specific reasons for the regional differences observed in this study.

### *Recommendations for Improvement to Enhance the Response of the Criminal Justice System to Stalking*

As evident from both the literature and the findings of this study, stalking is a complex and challenging crime to address, particularly for law enforcement agencies. The difficulties in policing stalking are often compounded in rural areas due to the limited resources available to law enforcement agencies, making it challenging to respond promptly and adequately to reports of stalking. Also, the mere distance between police officers and victims can result in delays in responding to reports of stalking in rural areas (Henrik Belfrage & Strand, 2008). The number of police officers available is also limited, making it difficult to have specialized officers who are trained to handle stalking cases. This is further compounded by a lack of support from other agencies that could aid in managing stalking cases. In rural areas, victims may not report stalking as frequently as in urban areas, and when they do report, the behaviour is generally more severe, increasing the risk of harm to victims (Strand & Storey, 2019). In urban areas, the high caseload of stalking cases makes it challenging for police officers to prioritize and respond to



cases effectively. Often, only the highest-risk cases receive attention, while lower-risk cases are left with little or no risk management (Strand, 2020).

Despite these challenges, there are several strategies that law enforcement agencies can implement to improve their response to stalking cases. One such strategy is the approach adopted by the Dutch police, which focuses on the intensity, rather than on the frequency of behaviour (Brandt & Voerman, 2020). Since 2016, the Dutch police have used the tool called the Screening Assessment for Stalking and Harassment to screen and manage cases (Hehemann et al., 2017; McEwan, 2019). This tool helps the officers dealing with stalking cases to determine the level of concern and subsequently guides the intervention process. A pilot study of the new approach showed that the Dutch police were positive about the new approach, appreciated the training and felt better equipped to deal with stalking cases. Dutch victims also reported positive feedback, and the case screeners and managers found the new approach helpful (Strand, 2020). The Danish police already could benefit from adopting a similar approach. Today, all police districts in Denmark have certified employees in the use of related tools, such as Guidelines for Stalking Assessment Management (Kropp et al., 2011) and the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment Guide (Belfrage et al., 2012); however, these tools focus heavily on psychological factors rather than on observable behaviour, are long and require certification to use, making them inaccessible for untrained personnel, such as frontline officers.

Next, the police should continue to work to establish and strengthen already existing partnerships with other agencies and organizations, such as local municipalities, victim services and mental health providers, to ensure that victims of stalking receive the support and resources they need. The police should also focus on further improving their response times to stalking cases and prioritize the safety of the victim. This could include providing victims with (acute) protective orders, monitoring the behaviour of the stalker and conducting regular follow-ups with the victim to ensure their safety. Finally, the police should work to increase public awareness of stalking and the resources available to victims. This could include providing educational materials and outreach programmes to schools and community groups, as well as increasing their online presence to better inform the public about the issue.

### *Limitations*

To our knowledge, this is the first Scandinavian study of its kind, allowing it to break new grounds and provide fresh insights into the topic under investigation. However, several limitations must be considered. First, the study's participants were all help-seeking victims recruited through the DSC. The participants may not be representative of all Danish stalking victims who seek help from the police, as those who do not use these resources may differ in their experiences or have different reasons for not seeking help. This limitation could impact the study's generalizability. Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be

subject to social desirability bias or recall bias. Stalking victims may be reluctant to report some details or may not accurately remember their experiences. Third, the study lacks a control group, which may limit its ability to establish causal relationships. Finally, the study does not provide information about the effectiveness of the anti-stalking law in reducing stalking incidents, which could be valuable in assessing the law's impact.

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

The findings indicate that the experiences of Danish stalking victims who sought help from the police were characterized by a lack of understanding and adequate support from the police in some regard; however, many victims did express satisfaction with their interaction with law enforcement. Those who decided not to pursue police involvement explained it with a lack of energy and the belief that the police would not be able to help them.

Given the limitations of the study, further research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of stalking victims with the Danish police. As such, future research could focus on the effectiveness of different interventions and support services for stalking victims, as well as the training and education of police officers to respond more effectively to stalking cases. Moreover, the study highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of gender and gender-based violence in stalking victimization and police response. Future studies could examine the intersection of gender, stalking victimization and police response to better understand how gender shapes stalking victimization experiences and the response from the police, preferably in a Danish context, as some other countries have conducted such research already (e.g., Finnegan & Fritz, 2012; Gonçalves et al., 2022; Wigman, 2009). Additionally, the current study did not explore the long-term effects of stalking victimization or the role of social support in mitigating the negative impacts of stalking victimization. Future research could examine the long-term effects of stalking victimization and explore the role of social support in promoting victims' recovery and well-being. Overall, this study sheds light on an important issue that has received relatively little attention in Denmark. The findings suggest that there is a need for improved police responses and support services for stalking victims in Denmark. The enforcement of the new anti-stalking law in 2022 is a positive step towards addressing this issue, but further action is needed to ensure that stalking victims receive the support and protection they need.

## **Data Availability**

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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