



A Glimpse From the Field: How Abusers Are Misusing Technology

Technology intersects with virtually every aspect of our daily lives. Through the use of technology, we can pay bills without using a stamp, brew coffee before even getting out of bed, and close the garage door from miles away. For survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and trafficking, however, technology can be both a great help as well as a tool that facilitates threats and harm. In an effort to understand the impact of abusers misusing technology and the types of technology used, the Safety Net Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) conducted a survey of victim service providers. This survey was conducted in the fall of 2014, with 346 respondents from 46 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Of the programs that responded, 97% indicated that victims who seek their services are being harassed, monitored, and threatened by offenders misusing technology. The majority of survey respondents were domestic violence programs (44%) or dual domestic violence and sexual assault programs (40%). Other service providers that responded include: programs serving victims of all crimes, law enforcement, sexual assault programs, civil legal services, prosecutor’s offices, trafficking, and other programs, including programs that provide services to elders; individuals with disabilities, including Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing; community health center; and general social services.

Survey Respondents

Type of Service Providers	Percentage of Respondents
Domestic violence program	44%
Dual domestic violence & sexual assault program	40%
Victims of all crimes	5%
Law enforcement	3%
Sexual Assault program	2%
Civil legal services	1%
Prosecutor’s offices	1%
Trafficking	1%
Other	3%

Types of Abuse

Abusers misuse a variety of technology in order to monitor, harass, impersonate, or stalk victims. For the purpose of the survey, monitoring is defined as accessing survivors’ technology, either physically or remotely, to learn/know about their activities. Harassment is defined as using technology to annoy, threaten, harass, or intimidate survivors. Impersonation is defined as pretending to be the survivor or someone else as a tactic of further abuse. For example, the abuser may access the survivor’s accounts and send messages pretending to be the survivor, create accounts pretending to be the survivor, or



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spoof caller ID. Finally, tracking/stalking is defined as using location technology to track survivors' location.

The survey results found that 79% of programs report that abusers monitor survivors' social media accounts, 74% report that abusers monitor victims by text messages, and 71% report that abusers monitor survivors' computer activities.

Misusing technology to harass survivors was another tactic that was highly reported. The top 3 types of technology that abusers used to harass survivors were through texting (96%), social media accounts (86%), and email (78%).

Monitoring via Technology

Type of Technology Misused by Offenders	Percentage of Programs Reported
Social media accounts	79%
Text messaging	74%
Computer	71%
Email	66%
Online accounts (phone, bank, etc.)	57%
Apps on cell phones	54%
Cell phone features (not apps)	39%
Tablets	39%
GPS tracking	37%
Gathering online data about victim	36%
Phone (not cell phone)	31%
Assistive technology	10%

Harassment via Technology

Type of Technology Misused by Offenders	Percentage of Programs Reported
Text messaging	96%
Social media accounts	86%
Email	78%
Phone (not cell phone)	59%
Posting abusive content online	55%
Cell phone features (not apps)	37%
Tablets	37%
Apps on cell phones	34%
Online accounts (phone, bank, etc.)	26%
GPS tracking	14%
Assistive technology	6%



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Impersonation via Technology

Type of Technology Misused by Offenders	Percentage of Programs Reported
Social media accounts	57%
Text messaging	44%
Email	36%
Online accounts (phone, bank, etc.)	30%
Posting abusive content online	27%
Phone (not cell phone)	14%
Assistive technology	3%

Tracking/Stalking via Technology

Type of Technology Misused by Offenders	Percentage of Programs Reported
Social media accounts	67%
Text messaging	57%
Computer	54%
Apps on cell phones	52%
GPS tracking	41%
Email	40%
Cell phone features (not apps)	34%
Online accounts (phone, bank, etc.)	30%
Gathering online data about victim	28%
Phone (not cell phone)	19%
Assistive technology	5%

Abuse Facilitated Through Social Media

Social media is a space in which abusers misuse frequently to monitor and harass survivors. As the charts above show, in terms of monitoring and harassment, social media and text messaging are the two types of technology most often used.

Facebook is the most misused platform by abusers, as reported by 99 percent of programs. It is unsurprising that nearly every program reported Facebook as the main social media abusers use to harass victims. With nearly 1.2 billion monthly active users, Facebook is a platform in which many people, including survivors and abusers, engage in. As one advocate noted in the survey, “Facebook is the hardest for

“Abusers create false social media accounts to impersonate survivors, and there’s very little we can do. It makes folks feel extremely vulnerable and disempowered.”

Survey Respondent



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survivors to shut down or avoid because they use it to keep in contact with other friends and family.”

Abusers go where survivors are, and they disrupt the technologies that survivors use. The technology itself does not necessarily increase or enhance abuse, but because the technology provides access to the survivor (or her/his information), it is the place where abuse occurs.

Social Media Platform Misused by Offenders	Percentage of Programs Reporting
Facebook	99%
Twitter	27%
Instagram	25%
Craigslist	15%
YouTube	12%
Porn site	10%
Tumblr	4%
LinkedIn	4%
Snapchat	3%
Gaming site	2%

Programs reported abusers misusing Twitter and Instagram at 27% and 25%, respectively. Other social media platforms in which less than 1% of programs reported as a place where abusers harass and harm victims were: Reddit, Ask.fm, Google+, Kik, Tinder, Yik Yak, Match.com, Fade, Pinterest, Topix, and other health and news sites. While programs reported fewer instances of abuse on these sites, it doesn't necessarily mean that less abuse is occurring in these spaces or that these sites are safer. The low response could merely indicate that fewer survivors are using those platforms.

Nonconsensual Pornography (aka Revenge Porn)

In recent years, many states have passed legislation around the issue of revenge pornography, in which abusers or perpetrators post sexually explicit images or videos of survivors online. This can happen frequently in the context of domestic violence or sexual assault where the abuser posts images of survivors to humiliate or control the victim. In the survey, 55% of programs reported that the survivors they work with have had abusers post sexually explicit images of them online without consent.

Children

One of the many ways abusers control and monitor a victim is through their children. Sixty percent of programs reported that abusers have spied or eavesdropped on the children and the survivor through the use of technology. Abusers do this by giving gifts to the child or planting devices on the child's belongings. The most popular technology misused by abusers through their children are cell phones (89% programs reported), followed by social networks (63%), and laptops (38%).



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Children’s Technology Misused by Abusive Partner

Type of Technology Misused by Offenders	Percentage of Programs Report
Cell phones	89%
Social networks	63%
Laptops	38%
GPS tracking devices	23%
Toys with hidden “spying” technology	11%
Handheld games	7%
Game consoles	5%

Advocates in the survey also noted that abusers, who are forbidden from contacting the survivor because of a protection order but have visitation or communication rights with the child, will use the children’s technology to try to contact the survivor – either asking the child to share information about the survivor or using the child’s cellphone to contact the survivor. In some cases, abusers gather information about the survivor through social networks their children are a part of (66% programs reported this). Abusers use the information gathered to taunt or harass the victim or to discredit them in custody cases, as reported by 41% of programs. Abusers have also tried locating survivors through technology (45% programs reported this).

What Kind of Help Is Needed?

The survey also asked what kind of help survivors are asking for when they reach out for help. Most often, they are seeking assistance on how to use their technology safely, including how to use cell phones safely and how to use the internet more privately. The chart below describes the types of assistance requested and the percentage of programs that reported survivors asking for this help.

Type of Assistance Requested	Percentage of Programs Reported
General cellphone safety and privacy assistance	76%
How to be safe online	71%
Help around GPS/location tracking on phones	58%
Technology and privacy issues associated with relocation	56%
Getting personal information or images off the internet	53%
How to increase privacy when using computers or tablets	51%

In general, survivors are asking for help figuring out how the technology stalking or harassment is occurring and what can be done to stop it. Advocates reported that when it comes to technology, it’s difficult to “prove” that the abusive person is behind the abuse. “Officers and state attorneys are saying



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that anyone could have posted those comments and pictures on Facebook, so proving in court that the abuser is doing it is very difficult,” noted one advocate. It’s not just Facebook or online abusive content that is perceived as difficult to prove. One advocate reported, “Our clients are regularly told that harassing text messages cannot be traced back to the perpetrator. This is disturbing to hear when it is clear that they are from the perpetrator.” These responses clearly show that there is a lack of understanding by service providers, including law enforcement and prosecutors, how technology works and how digital evidence can be preserved and documented. In both of the examples given, investigators could, through IP addresses, phone records, or other account information, show that the abuser was behind the threats and harassment.

Conclusion

As all of us, including survivors, use more technology in our daily lives and spend more time online and on our phones, it’s not surprising that abusers are also in these spaces. A common tactic of abusers is to control their victims, and they do that through monitoring technology use, online activities, or limiting victim’s contact with others. Technology is a tool that easily facilitates abusers’ control.

What is also clear in this survey is that survivors of abuse need help and assistance on what to do when abusers are misusing technology. In addition, service providers also need more education on how they can assist survivors. Survey respondents noted that they would like more trainings on basic safety planning around technology, how to enhance personal privacy, and how to detect spyware and GPS tracking/monitoring.

“We’re working with a 14-year-old girl whose abusive boyfriend created fake Facebook accounts and posted naked pics of her after inviting all her friends and family to be “friends.” The police won’t take it seriously, Facebook says they can’t really do anything to prevent it, and the community is bullying and blaming the victim.”

Through this Department of Justice funded project and survey, the Safety Net Project at NNEDV has been and will be developing resources and trainings to meet this need. For more information about resources that has been developed as part of this project, visit: techsafety.org/resources.

Limitations of This Survey

The results in this survey represent the percentage of local advocacy programs that responded to the survey, based on the experiences of survivors they assist. This data does not reflect the percentage of occurrences, prevalence, or incidences of abuse, harassment, or stalking experienced or reported by survivors or the percentage of abusers or stalkers who use these tactics. Offenders who misuse technology often misuse more than one type of technology and often perpetrate other forms of abuse, such as physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse.