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Text messages become a growing weapon in dating violence

By Donna St. George
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The text messages to the 22-year-old Virginia woman arrived during the day and night, sometimes 20 or 30 at once. Her ex-boyfriend wanted her back. He would not be refused. He texted and called 758 times.

In New York, a 17-year-old trying to break up with her boyfriend got fewer messages, but they were menacing. "You don't need nobody else but me," read one. Another threatened to kill her.

It is all part of what is increasingly called "textual harassment," a growing aspect of dating violence at a time when [cellphones and unlimited texting plans are ubiquitous](#) among the young. It can be insidious, because messages pop up at the sender's will: Where r u? Who r u with? Why didnt u answer me?

"It's gotten astonishingly worse in the last two years," says Jill Murray, who has written several books on dating violence and speaks on the topic nationally. Especially for those who have grown up in digital times, "it's part and parcel of every abusive dating relationship now."

The harassed often feel compelled to answer the messages, whether they are one-word insults or 3 a.m. demands. Texts arrive in class, at the dinner table, in movie theaters -- 100 or more a day, for some.

Harassment is "just easier now, and it's even more persistent and constant, with no letting up," says Claire Kaplan, director of sexual and domestic violence services at the University of Virginia, which became the focus of national attention in May with the [killing of 22-year-old lacrosse player Yeardley Love](#).

Police have charged Love's ex-boyfriend, George Hugueley V, also 22, with first-degree murder and allege that he removed her computer from the crime scene as he fled. Police were investigating whether Hugueley sent Love threatening e-mails or text messages.

Kacey Kirkland, a victim services specialist with the Fairfax County Police Department, has seen textual harassment in almost every form: Threats. Rumors. Lies. Late-night questions.

"The advances in technology are assisting the perpetrators in harassing and stalking and threatening their victims," Kirkland says.

In the case involving the 22-year-old who received 758 messages from her ex-boyfriend -- all unanswered -- the harassment led to stalking charges and a protective order, Kirkland says.

Harassment by text is only one facet of abusive relationships, which often involve contact in person, by phone, by [e-mail, and through Facebook or other social networking sites](#).

Warning signs hidden

"What technology offers is irrefutable evidence of the abuse," says Cindy Southworth, founder of the [Safety Net Project](#) on technology at the National Network to End Domestic Violence, who says it helps in court and is hoping for an increase in conviction rates.

As a parent, Lynne Russell thinks the privacy of text messaging helped obscure the danger that her daughter,

Siobhan "Shev" Russell, 19, faced. The teenager from Oak Hill, Va., was [killed by her boyfriend in April 2009](#), 10 weeks after delivering a [graduation speech at Mountain View Alternative High School](#).

Later, Lynne Russell and her husband found scores of texts, some disturbing, that Siobhan's boyfriend, now 18, had sent. "I don't think she recognized the warning signs, and we didn't see the signs until it was too late," says Russell, who plans to start a dating-violence awareness campaign in the fall.

[A federal survey](#) released this month showed one of 10 high school students nationally reported being hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend during the previous year. In Maryland, which did a similar survey, one in six said they were hurt.

Although such surveys do not show a rise in violence, the texting culture has changed the experience.

In Rockville, a woman in her 20s was so closely tracked that her partner insisted that she text him photos to prove her whereabouts -- each with a clock displaying the time, says Hannah Sassoon, coordinator of Montgomery County's domestic violence response team.

Katalina Posada, 22, a recent graduate of the University of Maryland, says one of her friends is frequently texted by a jealous boyfriend. "It's like the 20 questions a parent would ask," she says, adding that she finally told her friend: "This isn't right."

Textual harassment is getting more attention as concerns about dating violence mount. In the past several years, about a dozen states have passed or are considering laws to bring dating violence education into schools.

The legislative push comes partly from parents such as Gary Cuccia, a Pennsylvania father whose daughter, [Demi Brae, was killed](#) a day after her 16th birthday in 2007. Cuccia says his daughter had broken up with her teenage boyfriend, whom the family thought of as likable, if a little jealous.

In the days before Demi's death, Cuccia would later learn, her ex-boyfriend texted her again and again: "You know you can't live without me," he wrote. "U need to see me." And: "I'm ballin my eyes."

When Demi finally agreed to see the boy, he came over when she was alone and stabbed her 16 times in her living room.

Her father says he thinks that the largely private nature of texting is an important aspect of the problem.

"When I was growing up, we had one phone in the whole house, and if you were fighting with your girlfriend, everybody knew about it," Cuccia says.

Last year, Maryland passed a bill to encourage -- rather than require -- school districts to teach the topic. It was less than what Bill and Michele Mitchell, who [lost their 21-year-old daughter, Kristin, to dating violence](#), wanted. But it was a start, and the couple from Ellicott City will continue to push, they say.

Bill Mitchell says he hopes that more young people will begin to see warning signs where his family did not.

Just hours before she was killed in 2005, Kristin had texted her boyfriend: *You are being ridiculous. Why cant i do something with my friends.*"

He later found and heard about other texts, including one that asked why she had gone to her class rather than spend time with her boyfriend. Kristin was in her senior year at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and graduated three weeks before her death.

Says Mitchell: "Text messaging, in the wrong hands, has to be about the worst thing that's come along when we're talking about dating violence and controlling personalities."

Being tracked

In a recent survey, nearly one in four of those ages 14 to 24 reported that partners check in multiple times a day to see where they are or who they are with, and more than one in 10 said partners demanded passwords, [according to a survey by the Associated Press and MTV](#).

One challenge is that many teens do not view excessive texting as a problem and may not recognize abusive behaviors. "If you're getting 50 messages an hour and you want 50 messages an hour, that's not a problem," says Marjorie Gilberg, executive director of [Break the Cycle](#), which works to end dating violence. "But if you're getting 50 messages an hour and you don't even want one, that's very different."

These sorts of topics are addressed through a teen help line called [Love Is Respect](#) and several national awareness campaigns, including MTV's effort on digital abuse, [A Thin Line](#), a joint effort on digital dating abuse called [That's Not Cool](#) and the initiative [Love Is Not Abuse](#).

In California, Jill Murray says her cases have included a 16-year-old whose ex-boyfriend paid four friends to help him text when he was asleep or at work. "It was like psychological torture."

Murray urges parents to pay more attention to their children's texting lives, checking to see how many messages they get, at what hour and from whom. "Parents don't know this is going on whatsoever," she says.

Staff writer Susan Kinzie contributed to this report.

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