Aggressive/intrusive behaviours, harassment and stalking of members of the United Kingdom parliament: a prevalence study and cross-national comparison

David V. James, Frank R. Farnham, Seema Sukhwal, Katherine Jones, Josephine Carlisle and Sara Henley


ABSTRACT
Politicians suffer intrusive and aggressive behaviours from members of the public, often lone actors fixated on personal grievances. Few explorations of intrusive behaviours towards politicians have been published; their results are not directly comparable. We surveyed intrusive/aggressive behaviours towards UK members of parliament (MPs); our survey instrument was then administered to MPs at three other parliaments (Queensland, New Zealand, and Norway), providing a cross-national, four-site comparison. 239 MPs completed the UK survey. This 38% response rate produced prevalence rates remarkably similar to the other sites, New Zealand having an 84% response rate. 81% of UK MPs had experienced one or more of the 12 behaviours specified, the mean being five. 18% had been subject to attack/attempted attack, 42% to threats to harm and 22% to property damage. In 53% of respondents, experiences met definitions of stalking or harassment. This has implications for the provision of risk assessment and management.

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KEYWORDS Violence; stalking; harassment; members of parliament; lone actors; risk assessment

Introduction

‘I didn’t realise before getting elected how many incidents we would have to deal with and how personal a lot of it is.’

An MP’s comments from the survey.

Politicians, in common with other people in the public eye, attract more inappropriate, intrusive or aggressive attention than the population at large (James, Farnham, & Wilson, 2013; Mullen, James et al., 2009). This is a consequence of...
their public profile (local or national), their responsibilities to their constituents and their being seen (often incorrectly) as being in possession of power. Whilst most contacts from the general public are appropriate, asking for help or advice, expressing opinions or, sometimes, even gratitude, a proportion are intrusive, demanding, or aggressive with a range of different motives (Mullen, James et al., 2009), some being preoccupied with idiosyncratic personal causes or quests for justice, in a manner that has attracted the term ‘fixation’. It is when communications or intrusions from members of the public disrupt an MP’s day, interfere with his or her function or cross the border into what is perceived as threatening, that they take on a different character and stand apart from what might be seen as the MP’s working role. Some such contacts may be isolated, but others are persistent and generate apprehension or fear. In doing so, they constitute forms of behaviour which amount to stalking or harassment.

The problem is not a new one (James, 2014; Régis, 1890), and its manifestations today are similar to those 150 years ago (Poole, 2000). However, in an increasingly security-conscious age, it has taken on fresh importance and generated new research. One of the fruits of this research has been the rediscovery of the fact, well described in the late nineteenth century, that the main risk of serious injury or death to politicians is from fixated loners, rather than terrorist groups. Such lone actors are usually pursuing highly personal grievances and many have a history of mental illness (Hoffmann, Meloy, Guldimann, & Ermer, 2011; James et al., 2007; Régis, 1890). Recent research has indicated that individuals hitherto typed as ‘lone actor terrorists’ share more in common with fixated loners than they do with terrorist groups and that to consider them as a separate grouping to the fixated may be a false dichotomy (Corner & Gill, 2015).

A further clear research finding is that fixated individuals who give rise to disruption, distress or physical attack have often given some previous indication of the risk that they may go on to pose. Such indications have come to be termed ‘warning behaviours’ (James et al., 2007; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldimann, & James, 2012; Scalora et al., 2002). Research efforts have been focused on developing ways of sifting out from the pool of inappropriate and aggressive contacts and communications those individuals who are at greatest risk of going on to engage in some serious act in the future. Once identified, interventions can be designed to manage down the risk, so preventing adverse events (James et al., 2013; Mullen et al., 2009).

Fixated threat assessment and management units have now been established in a number of countries to perform this role (Boyce, 2011; James, Kerrigan, Forfar, Farnham, & Preston, 2010; Pathé et al., 2015; Scalora, Baumgartner, & Plank, 2003; van der Meer, Bootsma, & Meloy, 2012). This approach relies upon appropriate cases of aggressive/intrusive behaviour being referred for assessment and, in turn, on potential referrers having an understanding of which sorts of behaviour should be brought to their attention. In order to plan and shape such services, it is necessary to have an understanding of the extent of the
problem, in other words the types of behaviour that politicians are subjected to, their prevalence and relative frequency. Secondly, it is important in developing risk assessment and management procedures to ascertain the associations of different forms of aggressive/intrusive behaviour, in terms of both victim vulnerabilities and perpetrator characteristics. Such investigations need to be undertaken in a number of different jurisdictions in order to ascertain whether the results are specific to each jurisdiction or have more general applicability.

Before the development of the questionnaire reported in this study, only a handful of prevalence reports of aggressive/intrusive behaviours towards politicians had been published, two in scientific journals, one in a book and three in government reports. Only the journal articles are available in English. Canadian federal and provincial politicians who had been in office in 1998 were surveyed: 26% of the 157 federal politicians who responded (a 52% response rate) believed that they had been subject to criminal harassment (Adams, Hazelwood, Pitre, & Bedard, 2009). In the Netherlands, a survey of politicians undertaken in 2001/2002 with a 35% response rate found that 33% of the 61 respondents had been stalked during their lifetimes and 46% threatened (Malsch, Visscher, & Blaauw, 2002). In Sweden, a 2005 survey showed that 74% of MPs had suffered harassment, threats or violence over the previous 15 years (Staatens Offentliga Utredningar, 2006). A further Swedish survey of around 14,000 local and national politicians, with a response rate of 68%, found that 36% of members of parliament who responded to the survey were subjected to some form of intimidation, violence or harassment during the year 2011 (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2012). A further survey of the same wide population in 2012 (Wallin & Wallin, 2014), with fewer questions and a 65% overall response rate, found that almost 60% of members of parliament had been subjected to threats or harassment in 2012, mainly through social media. Different definitions were used from the survey of the year before: the differences in results were ascribed to methodological change. In Norway, a comparison was made of general population and MP responses to questions on stalking-related experiences which had been included in a larger survey of physical and mental health (Narud & Dahl, 2015). Seventy-five percent of the 95 MPs for whom data was available (56% response rate) ‘reported positively on a least one of the stalking screening items.’ Twenty-eight per cent of the MP sample fulfilled the definition used for ‘genuine stalking.’ Apart from Narud & Dahl (2015), all the European surveys are available only in their source languages. There have been no previous studies of parliaments in the UK. None of the results from the above surveys are directly comparable, because of the differences in definitions and methodologies.

The aims of the current project were; firstly, to ascertain the forms of aggressive/intrusive behaviours that politicians are subjected to, their prevalence and their relative frequency; secondly, to establish whether there are major similarities between different countries or whether the experiences of politicians were specific to their own country, using a common, clearly-defined methodology;
thirdly, to study the associations of the different forms of aggressive/intrusive behaviours experienced, in terms of victim, perpetrator and situational factors; fourthly, to examine the psychological effects upon politicians of their experiences; fifthly, to ascertain the measures and behavioural changes that politicians adopted in response to aggressive/intrusive behaviours.

A survey instrument was developed and administered to four different parliaments, in the following order: the UK parliament at Westminster, the state parliament in Queensland (Australia), the Norwegian national parliament and the New Zealand national parliament. This paper reports the prevalence results from the UK survey and compares them with data from the other sites, some of which has recently been published (Bjelland & Bjørgo, 2014; Every-Palmer, Barry-Walsh, & Pathé, 2015; Pathé, Phillips, Perdacher, & Heffernan, 2014) and some of which is previously unpublished. In addition, the data are used to ascertain the proportion of Westminster MPs who have experienced behaviours which satisfy definitions of stalking. The associations of the aggressive/intrusive behaviours experienced, both in terms of victim and perpetrator characteristics, and psychological and practical impact, are the subject of a separate paper (James et al., 2015).

Method

Study population

The study population comprised members of the national parliament of the UK, specifically members of the House of Commons, the elected chamber with legislative supremacy in the UK’s bicameral parliamentary system.

Survey instrument

The study comprised a questionnaire survey. The survey instrument was adapted from a questionnaire developed for a large Australian community survey (Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2002), the adaptations comprising the changes to title and particulars of location required to tailor it to a specific audience. It was therefore based on a tried and tested model, which had also proved its usefulness in a study of general practitioners in the UK (Wooster, Farnham, & James, 2013, 2015). The questionnaire was designed to capture the individual aggressive/intrusive behaviours which may be involved in harassment or stalking. However, these terms are not used in the questionnaire, which is identified as a ‘survey of inappropriate behaviours towards Members of Parliament’. The questionnaire contained 50 questions that required an answer to be chosen and circled, four questions requiring the insertion of a numerical answer and seven free-text fields. A proportion of the questions were to be completed only by those who had experienced the behaviours in question. The survey was restricted to experiences in the course of the MPs’ work. MPs were encouraged
to return the questionnaire, whether or not they had experienced any of the problems with which it was concerned.

The first part of the questionnaire enquired about MPs’ experiences during their time in parliament of 12 forms of inappropriate, intrusive or aggressive behaviour. As befits such surveys, where questionnaires cannot be accompanied by code-books of definitions, the items were simply stated in plain and clear language, in the following terms: (1) physically attacked or tried to attack you: (2) threatened to harm you or those close to you, directly or indirectly: (3) made unwanted approaches to you (e.g. at home, at work, in public places): (4) behaved in an alarming manner at your constituency surgery or office: (5) followed you (e.g. on foot, by car): (6) loitered around your home or other places you frequent: (7) interfered with your property (e.g. car): (8) initiated spurious legal action against you: (9) distributed malicious material about you (e.g. flyers, websites, posters, newspaper ads): (10) sent you inappropriate letters faxes or emails: (11) made inappropriate telephone calls to you: (12) engaged in inappropriate social media contacts (e.g. Twitter, Facebook). This section of the questionnaire therefore concerned the totality of each MP’s experiences during their parliamentary careers.

In a second section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to formulate their answers, in terms of the case that most stuck in their minds, a form of wording carefully chosen as most likely to reflect the most serious cases, whilst avoiding problems with respondents’ interpretation that the use of the word ‘serious’ would have been likely to engender. A series of questions related to the length of the episode in question; whether multiple incidents were involved or not; the psychological reactions of the MPs to the episode, including fear; their understanding of the person’s motives; whether or not the person appeared to be mentally ill; and the measures that the MPs took in response to the episode. Questions requiring free-text responses were included: respondents were asked to describe their experiences of aggressive/intrusive behaviours, and also to offer an account of the case which had affected them most.

**Administration of the survey**

The survey was supported by the Parliament Security Committee, the Serjeant-at-Arms’ Office and the Home Office. It was distributed to Members of Parliament at Westminster by the Chief Whip’s office of each political party. The envelope in which each questionnaire was sent out was addressed to a named MP. The survey was distributed once only, with no follow-up or reminder, as Members were deemed too busy by the House authorities to be contacted more than once. Responses were directed to a named official, known to most MPs. The questionnaire was circulated in February 2010. There were 646 Members of the 2005 Parliament (House of Commons Library, 2006). Five were Sinn Fein members who do not attend and one seat belonged to the Speaker of the
House: at the time the questionnaire was circulated, four MPs were suspended and non-attending, and three seats were vacant. These were excluded from the survey, the number of MPs receiving the questionnaire being 633.

The questionnaire allowed members to fill in their names and personal details, if they so chose. It was recognised that many respondents would consider the material disclosed to be personal and might feel more comfortable giving answers anonymously. The questionnaire contained a statement that answers would be treated in strictest confidence and that none would be disclosed in any identifiable form in the study.

**Semi-structured interview**

Respondents were also asked whether they would be prepared to take part in a face-to-face follow-up interview. A random sample was then chosen of 15 MPs who had experienced aggressive/intrusive behaviours. It was not possible to ascertain whether this sample was representative of all respondents, given that a proportion of respondents were anonymous. A semi-structured interview was conducted separately with each of the 15 MPs. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and was recorded through manual transcription. The interview covered a number of specific themes: the dividing line between a communication being an acceptable expression of discontent and constituting an unacceptable intrusion; mistakes that the MPs had made in dealing with difficult constituents; the MPs’ understanding of motivation in the individuals concerned; factors that appeared to put MPs at greater risk of aggressive/intrusive behaviours; influences on the mode of communication; the effect of email and social media on aggressive contacts; and factors which MPs considered when deciding whether or not to involve the police. Responses on these issues were examined for common themes. Their comments are summarised, with representative quotes, in this and a companion study (James et al., 2015), under the specific headings given above.

**Definitions of stalking, harassment and ‘serious incidents’**

Stalking comprises a course of conduct, involving specific unwanted and intrusive behaviours, which are repeated and which occasion anxiety, distress or fear. The items in the first part of the questionnaire were specifically designed to capture the range of behaviours relevant to definitions of stalking. Legal definitions of stalking vary according to jurisdiction and many laws or legal codes specify the relevant behaviours, which include those specified in the survey questionnaire. However, legal definitions of stalking generally only require two such behaviours to constitute a course of conduct and, in some jurisdictions, a single behaviour. Whereas this construction may be necessary in the legal framing of criminal offences, it does not conform to the general understanding of the concept of stalking. In addition, the cross-national comparison involved
four jurisdictions, each with different legislative frameworks. For these reasons, it was decided not to use legal definitions of stalking in the study.

An early and influential research definition of stalking specified that there should be at least 10 incidents over a period of four weeks (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell, & Stuart, 1999). Subsequent work from the same group found this to be too restrictive and the specific number of incidents was removed from the definition, whilst the criterion of repetition was retained. Subsequent research demonstrated elegantly that the phenomenon of repeated, unwanted intrusive behaviours causing fear separated into two distinct phenomena: brief periods of repeated behaviours lasting only a day or a few days, and persistent behaviours lasting for more than two weeks (Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2004). This two-week cut-off has been shown to represent a watershed in terms of the impact on the victim (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2009, pp. 31–33). This differentiation was adopted in the choice of definition for this study. Cases of repeated unwanted aggressive or intrusive behaviours, occasioning fear, which lasted for more than two weeks, were defined as stalking. Those that lasted for a lesser period, including single episodes of intrusive/aggressive behaviour, were defined as harassment. Cases where inappropriate behaviours did not occasion any degree of fear were analysed separately. The presence or absence of stalking was calculated from the second section of the survey (see above). Harassment was only reported for cases where stalking was absent. Cases restricted to incidents concerning the activities of organised groups, in effect the Provisional Irish Republican Army and animal rights activists, were excluded.

A category of ‘serious incident’ was adopted from the Norwegian study (Bjelland & Bjørgo, 2014). This comprised cases in which there had either been attack/attempted attack, threats to harm, or interference/damage to property.

Cross-national data sources

The survey instrument used at Westminster was also administered at the parliaments of Queensland, New Zealand and Norway, with minor variations at each site, comprising the omission or addition of specific questions. Some results from the Queensland and New Zealand surveys have been published (Every-Palmer et al., 2015; Pathé et al., 2014): additional data were supplied for the current study by researchers at the two sites. Data from the Norwegian survey have not been published in scientific journals, but are available in a government report (Bjelland & Bjørgo, 2014). The report is only available in Norwegian; it was necessary to translate it into English for the purposes of the current study.

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS, version 21 (IBM Corp, 2012). To examine differences between groups on categorical variables, Pearson’s chi-square (χ²)
analyses were used and odds ratios (OR) were calculated, with 95% confidence intervals. The effect size (\( \hat{\phi} \)) (Siegel & Castellan, 1988) was also calculated for each measure of association, because effect sizes enable interpretation of the data beyond, and independently of, the information provided by \( p \) values and take into account the reduced power of uneven sample sizes. Independent \( t \) tests were used to compare the means of samples of interval data, incorporating Levene’s test for homogeneity of variance.

**Multiple testing**

The associations of the harassment and stalking of Members of the Westminster Parliament is an unresearched area. This study constitutes an exploration of possible associations, rather than hypothesis testing. As such, multiple testing was used. Standard methods to correct for multiple testing are ‘highly conservative’ (Altman, 1991, p. 211), risking Type II errors in modest samples, particularly where interrelated families of questions are used, as here. Accordingly, no corrections to significance values were made to compensate for multiple testing; caution should be exercised in interpreting \( p \) values greater than 0.01.

**Results**

**Data completion**

Eleven questionnaires were returned uncompleted or containing only the MP’s views on the usefulness of the survey (e.g. ‘this is one of the most fatuous questionnaires that I have ever received. I decline to fill it in … It is a total waste of public money’) or suggestions as to alternative sources of data: (e.g. ‘read my autobiography’). Completed questionnaires were returned by 239 of the 636 MPs, this constituting a response rate of 37.8%. Eighty-seven (36.4%) responses were anonymous. Of the MPs who identified themselves, none came from Northern Ireland. Fifteen non-responders to the questionnaire (a 4% sample) were approached and asked why they had not completed the survey: all said that they were unaware of it; several remarked that the survey may have been filtered out by their staff.

Data on whether or not particular forms of inappropriate behaviour had been experienced were 100% complete. For the 193 cases in which any of the behaviours in the questionnaire had been experienced by the MPs, sufficient data was available in 187 cases (96.9%) in terms of fear and of length of time the behaviours lasted to determine whether the definition of harassment was met and in 179 (92.7%) cases whether the definition of stalking was satisfied, these two groups being mutually exclusive in the study design. Completeness of data for other items varied, but was not lower than 84.5%, other than for the two questions not answered by those wishing to remain anonymous (age and sex).
**Characteristics and representative nature of the sample**

Of the 239 respondents, 152 (63.6%) gave their names, whilst 87 (36.4%) chose to remain anonymous. 154 (64.4%) gave their sex and 152 (63.6%) their ages. Of those for whom data was available, 112 (72.7%) were male and 42 (27.3%) female. This compares with 80% being male in the relevant parliamentary intake. The age range was from 27 to 80, with a mean of 58.5 (SD 9.5). This compares with a mean for the whole Parliament of 51, successful Labour candidates being, on average, three years older than their Conservative, and six years older than their Liberal Democrat, counterparts (House of Commons Library, 2006).

Of those who gave their names, 58 (38.2%) were Conservative, 80 (52.6%) Labour, 11 (7.2%) Liberal Democrats and 3 (2.0%) from minority parties. This compares with the figures for the whole 2005 intake of 31% Conservative, 55% Labour, 9.6% Liberal Democrat and 4.4% other, so constituting a slight under-representation of Conservatives, which may have influenced the average age (House of Commons Library, 2006). Thirty-six (16.4%) had entered Parliament in 2005: this is in line with the figure of 18% for those elected for the first time in the full 2005 Parliament (House of Commons Library, 2006).

**Prevalence of aggressive or intrusive behaviours**

Of the 239 MPs who responded to the survey, 80.8% (192) had experienced at least one of the forms of intrusive/aggressive behaviour set out in the questionnaire (see Table 1). The mean number of different types of behaviour experienced was 5.1 (SD 2.8; median and mode 5; range 1–12). In 45 cases (23.9%), the behaviour was still continuing and in 34 (18.1%) it was unclear yet whether or not it had stopped. More than half of those who had experienced such behaviours had done so at home and more than three-quarters at their constituency offices, with the Palace of Westminster (the parliamentary complex) in third place.

One hundred and five MPs (55% of the sample) had experienced at least one of the 12 intrusive/aggressive behaviours in the last 12 months. The mean number of different types of behaviour experienced was 6.1 (SD 2.7; median 6; mode 4; range 1–12. The behaviours had stopped in 24.8% of cases (n = 26), were continuing in 42.9% (n = 45) and the MP was uncertain whether they had stopped or not in 32.4% of cases (n = 34).

The prevalence of serious incidents was calculated, these comprising cases that had suffered attempted/actual attacks, threats to harm or physical damage to property (Bjelland & Bjørgo, 2014). 49% of respondents (117) had experienced such incidents.

Eighteen per cent (43) of MPs had been subjected to attack or attempted attack. Of these, almost half (21: i.e. 9% of all respondents) had been so more than once, and a quarter more than twice. Examples of free-text responses in
Table 1. Aggressive or intrusive behaviours experienced by members of the UK parliament.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of inappropriate behaviour experienced</th>
<th>Responders (N = 239)</th>
<th>Number of times (%) that an inappropriate behaviour was experienced in subgroups experiencing it&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Responders (N = 191)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entire career as a member of parliament</td>
<td>Last 12 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>Once only</td>
<td>Twice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attack or attempted attack</td>
<td>43 (18.0%)</td>
<td>21 (50%)</td>
<td>10 (23.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats to harm MP or those close to them,</td>
<td>101 (42.3%)</td>
<td>26 (27.7%)</td>
<td>20 (21.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>directly or indirectly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted approaches to MP (e.g. at home,</td>
<td>125 (52.3%)</td>
<td>23 (18.9%)</td>
<td>18 (14.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work, in public places)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaved in an alarming manner at constituency surgery or office</td>
<td>132 (55.2%)</td>
<td>28 (21.7%)</td>
<td>36 (27.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followed MP (e.g. on foot, by car)</td>
<td>37 (15.5%)</td>
<td>14 (41.2%)</td>
<td>7 (20.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loitered around MP’s home or other places MP frequents</td>
<td>64 (26.8%)</td>
<td>13 (21.3%)</td>
<td>14 (23.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfered with MP’s property (e.g. car)</td>
<td>52 (21.8%)</td>
<td>19 (37.3%)</td>
<td>18 (35.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated spurious legal action against MP</td>
<td>46 (19.3%)</td>
<td>24 (55.8%)</td>
<td>10 (23.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed malicious material about MP (e.g. flyers, web-sites, posters, newspaper ads)</td>
<td>109 (45.8%)</td>
<td>23 (22.8%)</td>
<td>25 (24.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent MP inappropriate letters, faxes or emails</td>
<td>152 (63.9%)</td>
<td>10 (7.4%)</td>
<td>8 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made inappropriate telephone calls to MP</td>
<td>101 (42.4%)</td>
<td>9 (9.5%)</td>
<td>7 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in inappropriate social media contact with MP</td>
<td>24 (10.1%)</td>
<td>4 (17.4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any of the above behaviours</td>
<td>193 (80.8%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Characteristics of the experience**

| Where were the behaviours experienced? | Responders (N = 239) | – | – | – | – | 105 (55.0%) | – | – | – | – | 105 (55.0%) |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|– | – | – | – | 105 (55.0%) | – | – | – | – | 105 (55.0%) |
| In constituency office                | 149 (77.2%) | – | – | – | – | 88 (84.3%) | – | – | – | – | 88 (84.3%) |
| At home                              | 101 (52.3%) | – | – | – | – | 60 (57.1%) | – | – | – | – | 60 (57.1%) |
| At parliamentary complex and offices  | 52 (26.9%) | – | – | – | – | 32 (31.1%) | – | – | – | – | 32 (31.1%) |
| Elsewhere                            | 52 (26.9%) | – | – | – | – | 36 (35.0%) | – | – | – | – | 36 (35.0%) |

<sup>a</sup>The percentages are for those who provided the relevant data: a small proportion of respondents did not.
the survey are the following: ‘Pulled a knife on me in the surgery’: ‘repeatedly punched me in the face’: ‘came at me with a hammer’: ‘hit with a brick’: ‘struck from behind’: ‘bottle thrown and hit me’: ‘thrown to the ground’: ‘shot with air rifle’: ‘attacked by a constituent with a samurai sword. I escaped with injuries to my hand, but my assistant was killed’: ‘stabbed in the head’: ‘nose broken’: ‘punched in face and stomach’: ‘cheek slashed’: ‘shot at’: ‘arm broken’: ‘came up behind me and grabbed me by the throat’: ‘knocked to ground by thrown object’: ‘letters containing razor blades’: ‘broken glass on doorstep at night, then rang bell’: ‘fists raised and clenched, lurching towards me’.

One hundred and one MPs (42.3% of respondents) had experienced threats to harm them or those close to them, directly or indirectly. There were numerous reports of ‘death threats’, both in person and by mail and ‘bomb threats’. Other examples were: ‘you had better keep an eye on your children’: ‘stated he would kill me if his child dies in hospital’: ‘threat to kill me by telephone at home – call taken by my seven-year-old daughter’: ‘I will destroy you’: ‘wife received phone calls saying “I am going to kill you or one of your family”’: ‘powder in letter to office’: ‘threats; children anxious; would jump when doorbell rang’: ‘anonymous phone threats to my family using unidentifiable mobile’: ‘petrol poured through letter box’: ‘worst sufferers of the threats are my children’: ‘wrote they knew where I lived and where my children went to school’: ‘threatened to shoot me’: ‘I know where your family live’: ‘said would shoot my family with a cross-bow’: ‘man with history of arson threatened to burn my house down’: ‘he wrote “I know where to find you”’: ‘said he had a knife and would use it on me.’ In addition, three MPs reported attacks on their wives, an item that was not included in the survey.

Fifty-two MPs (21.8%) had had their property interfered with or damaged: ‘car vandalised four times in the last six months’: ‘tyres slashed three times and paint-stripper poured over car’: ‘bricks thrown through windows at my home’: ‘car tyre damaged’: ‘brick thrown through kitchen window narrowly missing my wife and child’: ‘foul graffiti about a “sex act” between me and another MP’: ‘car vandalised’: ‘concrete blocks thrown through windows’: ‘two incidents of serious vandalism to my car’: ‘smashed car with rocks’: ‘lighted cigarettes put through letter-box’.

Of the 12 forms of intrusive or aggressive behaviour included in the survey, the most commonly experienced were: inappropriate letters, faxes or emails (63.9%); alarming behaviour at the constituency surgery (55.2%); and unwanted approaches (52.3%). In Table 2, the behaviours are ranked according to the proportion of MPs experiencing them and this is compared with studies of Queensland, New Zealand and Norwegian MPs, using the same questionnaire.

**Fear**

Of the 193 respondents who had experienced at least one form of aggressive/intrusive behaviour, 132 (72.9%) endorsed items stating that they had been made
Table 2. Comparison of behaviours experienced in the UK, Queensland, New Zealand and Norwegian samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of MPs and sample</th>
<th>UK parliament, Westminster (this paper)</th>
<th>Queensland parliament (Pathé et al., 2014)</th>
<th>New Zealand parliament (Every-Palmer et al., 2015)</th>
<th>Norwegian parliament (Bjelland &amp; Bjørgo, 2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of survey</td>
<td>February 2010</td>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>April–June 2014</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of assembly</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio male/Female (%)</td>
<td>80/20</td>
<td>64/36</td>
<td>68/32</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of active members at time of survey</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of responders</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rate (%)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of inappropriate behaviour experienced</td>
<td>% Rank</td>
<td>% Rank</td>
<td>% Rank</td>
<td>% Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent MP inappropriate letters, faxes or emails</td>
<td>63.9 1</td>
<td>78.6 1=</td>
<td>68 1</td>
<td>69.1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaved in an alarming manner at constituency surgery or office</td>
<td>55.2 2</td>
<td>78.6 1=</td>
<td>62 2</td>
<td>25.2 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted approaches to MP (e.g. at home, at work, in public places)</td>
<td>52.3 3</td>
<td>60.5 5</td>
<td>50 4</td>
<td>37.3 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed malicious material about MP (e.g. flyers, websites, posters, newspaper ads)</td>
<td>45.8 4</td>
<td>69.0 4</td>
<td>48 5=</td>
<td>52.3 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made inappropriate telephone calls to MP</td>
<td>42.4 5</td>
<td>71.4 3</td>
<td>45 7</td>
<td>45.0 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats to harm MP or those close to them, directly or indirectly</td>
<td>42.3 6</td>
<td>59.5 6</td>
<td>48 5=</td>
<td>27.0 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loitered around MP’s home or other places MP frequents</td>
<td>26.8 7</td>
<td>23.3 10</td>
<td>28 9</td>
<td>10.8 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfered with MP’s property (e.g. car)</td>
<td>21.8 8</td>
<td>34.9 8</td>
<td>31 8</td>
<td>8.1 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated spurious legal action against MP</td>
<td>19.3 9</td>
<td>27.9 9</td>
<td>11 12</td>
<td>3.6 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attack or attempted attack</td>
<td>18.0 10</td>
<td>14.0 11=</td>
<td>15 11</td>
<td>14.4 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followed MP (e.g. on foot, by car)</td>
<td>15.5 11</td>
<td>14.0 11=</td>
<td>22 10</td>
<td>7.2 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in inappropriate social media contact with MP</td>
<td>10.1 12</td>
<td>36.6 7</td>
<td>60 3</td>
<td>37.8 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any of the above behaviours</td>
<td>80.8 –</td>
<td>93.0 –</td>
<td>87 –</td>
<td>84.4 –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Serious' incidents</td>
<td>49.0 67</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where were the behaviours experienced?</td>
<td>In constituency office</td>
<td>77.2 1</td>
<td>90 1</td>
<td>66.7 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home</td>
<td>52.3 2</td>
<td>53 2</td>
<td>36.8 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the parliamentary building/offices</td>
<td>26.9 3=</td>
<td>25 3</td>
<td>34.5 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>26.9 3=</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>34.5 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aData unavailable.
fearful by their experience. There were clear differences between those who had been made fearful by their experiences and those who had not in terms of the category of behaviour to which the MP had been subject and of the place at which the experiences had occurred. Those experiencing fear were significantly more likely to have experienced attack/attempted attack ($\chi^2 4.916, p < 0.027, \phi 0.165, OR 2.79[1.10–7.11]$), threats to harm the MP or those close to them ($\chi^2 13.875, p < 0.001, \phi 0.277, OR 3.61[1.80–7.23]$), unwanted approaches ($\chi^2 15.630, p < 0.001, \phi 0.294, OR 3.84[1.93–7.64]$), alarming behaviour at the constituency surgery ($\chi^2 11.687, p < 0.001, \phi 0.254, OR 3.29[1.63–6.61]$), being followed ($\chi^2 11.058, p < 0.001, \phi 0.247, OR 8.48[1.96–36.77]$), people loitering around the home or places they frequent ($\chi^2 10.648, p < 0.001, \phi 0.243, OR 3.78[1.64–8.68]$), interference with property ($\chi^2 8.917, p < 0.003, \phi 0.222, OR 3.83[1.52–9.68]$) and receiving inappropriate telephone calls ($\chi^2 5.473, p < 0.019, \phi 0.174, OR 2.20[1.13–4.30]$). ‘Serious incidents’ were associated with fear in 81% of cases, as were 58.5% of ‘non-serious’ cases ($\chi^2 10.751, p < 0.001, \phi 0.244, OR 3.01[1.54–5.90]$). There were no significant associations with less directly intrusive forms of behaviour: inappropriate letters, spurious legal action, social media contacts and distribution of malicious material.

There were also differences in terms of the place that the behaviour was experienced, with a significantly greater proportion fearful with intrusive behaviours experienced at home ($\chi^2 12.534, p < 0.000, \phi 0.265, OR 3.42[1.70–6.87]$) or at the constituency surgery ($\chi^2 7.852, p < 0.005, \phi 0.210, OR 3.02[1.36–6.69]$), but not at the Palace of Westminster.

**Prevalence of stalking and harassment**

Ninety of those who had responded to the survey (37.7%) had been stalked. In 46.5% of stalking cases, the behaviour had continued for more than a year and, in another 14.1% of cases, for more than five years. In 7% of cases, it was still continuing. Thirty-seven (19.2%) of those who had not been stalked had experienced harassment. This amounts to 15.5% of all respondents. Overall, therefore, 53.2% of all respondents had experienced stalking or harassment in the course of their work.

Cases where data as to length of episode or level of fear were missing were treated as negatives for the purpose of the above analysis. However, this is likely to have led to some degree of underestimate. If the prevalence were calculated only for those where adequate data were available, the figures would be 50.3% for stalking and 69.5% for stalking or harassment. For the purposes of this study, the lower, more conservative figures have been adopted.

**Differences in behaviours between stalking and harassment**

Those subject to stalking were significantly more likely than those subject to harassment to have endured inappropriate approaches, $\chi^2 11.829, p < 0.001, \phi 0.310,$
OR 4.348 (1.821–10.417); being followed, $\chi^2$8.217, $p$ 0.004, $\phi$0.258, OR 6.993 (1.565–31.250); people loitering around their home or places they frequent, $\chi^2$15.215, $p$ < 0.001, $\phi$0.352, OR 7.756 (2.463–23.256) initiation of spurious legal action, $\chi^2$4.094, $p$ 0.043, $\phi$0.182, OR 3.106 (0.995–9.709); distribution of malicious material about them, $\chi^2$10.223, $p$ 0.001, $\phi$0.288, OR 3.802 (1.637–8.850); inappropriate letters, emails etc., $\chi^2$5.921, $p$ 0.015, $\phi$0.219, OR 2.717 (1.198–6.135); and inappropriate social media contact, $\chi^2$5.324, $p$ 0.021, $\phi$0.208, OR 8.000 (1.024–62.500). There were no significant differences between stalking and harassment groups in attack/attempted attack, threats or damage to property. Those who were stalked were subject to a significantly greater number of different types of behaviour than those who were harassed (stalking mean 6.48, median 6.00, mode 4.00, range 2–12: harassment mean 4.05, median 4.00, mode 4.00, range 1–11: $t$ 4.807, $df$ 121, $p$ < 0.001).

**Interviews with MPs**

One hundred and eighteen MPs expressed their willingness to be interviewed about their experiences of intrusive or aggressive behaviours that they had encountered in the course of their work. Fifteen MPs were randomly chosen and were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured format.

**The boundary between ‘part of the job’ and the unacceptable**

A consistent view emerged. There are clear dividing lines between what is reasonable and part of the job and what isn't. The first line is where there begins to be an element of threat. Members stated that being aggressive is of a different quality to threat: aggressive communications one ‘bins or presses delete’: threats evoke a different emotional response. The second boundary was where the communications or behaviours began to involve the MP’s family. Whatever they were prepared to tolerate if it only involved them became intolerable if it threatened or involved their families.

**Being sheltered from the experience**

Seven MPs made the point that most problematic or aggressive letters never got to them, because their staff filtered them out. One remarked that this probably happened to an even greater extent with those with ministerial or party posts.

**Discussion**

This is the first study of the prevalence of aggressive/intrusive behaviours towards MPs in the UK. It is also the largest sample of MPs from a single parliament yet
The most striking finding of the returns from 239 MPs is that 81% (192) had experienced at least one of the types of intrusive/aggressive behaviour contained in the survey (55% in the last 12 months), with the mean number of different types of behaviour experienced being 5.1. Forty-two per cent (101) of respondents had experienced threats to harm them or those close to them; 18% (43) had been subject to attack/attempted attack, nearly half (21; 9%) more than once and a quarter more than twice; and 22% (52) had had their property intentionally damaged. The examples of these forms of behaviour given above demonstrate the seriousness of the conduct concerned.

The survey questionnaire was designed to identify types of behaviour without necessitating any judgement on the part of the respondent as to whether these constituted harassment or stalking or were simply ‘part of the job.’ With half of respondents reporting behaviours that fell into the serious incident category and nearly three-quarters experiencing fear in response, the questionnaire picked up those forms of behaviour at which it was aimed, rather than incidents of lesser concern. The qualitative material from MP interviews indicates that there is a clear boundary between what is acceptable and what is not.

The proportion that had experienced intrusive/aggressive behaviours in the UK parliament is similar to that found in subsequent uses of the survey in other parliaments: 87% in New Zealand, 93% in Queensland and 84.4% in Norway. In Table 2, the percentages of MPs in the four different parliaments experiencing each of the 12 intrusive/aggressive behaviours are ranked in terms of their relative frequency. The rankings for the three parliaments in countries where the Queen is head of state are strikingly similar, the principal difference being the greater importance of social media, the more recent the survey. The figures from Norway show smaller proportions engaging in unwanted approaches or alarming behaviour at the constituency surgery, which probably reflects differences in the manner of organised contact between MPs and constituents. The proportion experiencing ‘serious incidents’ was 49% in the UK survey, compared with 67% in Queensland and 35.7% in the Norwegian survey. The similarity in results indicates that the phenomenon is one independent of national boundaries. This has two useful implications: firstly, it suggests that associations of particular behaviours, which can be used in the deriving of risk factors, may be valid and reproducible across national boundaries; secondly, management and intervention strategies may be transferable between countries, within the limitations of any differences in legal framework. James et al. (2013) have suggested that, given that the phenomenon is closely linked to mental illness, the prevalence of which appears similar across different countries and times, its prevalence is likely to change only in the technological ease with which communications can be delivered.

Of those who had experienced any form of aggressive/intrusive behaviour, 72.9% had been frightened by the experience. Sufficient information was available to ascertain that 38% of respondents had been stalked in the course of their work as an MP. Harassment had been experienced by 15.5% of respondents.
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(excluding those who had experienced stalking). In other words, more than half of respondents had been subject to stalking or harassment.

Stalking and harassment proved to be different in terms of the behaviours with which each was associated, indicating that the two-week definitional divide (Purcell et al., 2004) has practical significance in differentiating between two patterns of behaviour. Of particular interest to threat assessment professionals is the finding that there were no significant differences between stalking and harassment cases in the proportion suffering attack/attempted attack, threats or damage to property. In other words, this is evidence that violence is not associated with longer duration of episode and that episodes of short duration need to be taken seriously. This concords with the finding in stalking cases in the general population that serious violence is negatively associated with duration (James & Farnham, 2003). It can also be seen against the finding, using the same survey instrument as in the current study, that general practitioners (GPs; family doctors) who were stalked were significantly less likely to be subject to attack/attempted attack than those who were harassed. The GP survey is more similar to the MP survey than general population surveys in that it excludes aggressive/intrusive behaviours from former intimates. It differs in that GPs have a longer time at risk, in that their careers last longer than those of MPs.

The career prevalence figure of 38% for stalking of MPs compares with lifetime stalking prevalence for the general population of 8% for women and 2% for men (Basile, Swahn, Chen & Saltzman, 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), the latter figures including the substantial category of former intimates, which do not form part of the survey of MPs’ experiences at work. Stalking prevalence amongst MPs is almost twice that experienced by psychiatrists in the UK or general practitioners (Whyte, Penny, Christopherson, Reiss, & Petch, 2011; Wooster et al., 2013), both these being high-risk professions. No prevalence figures for stalking of MPs were calculated in the New Zealand, Queensland or Norwegian surveys. In the earlier comparison of Norwegian MPs with a general population sample, 28% fulfilled a definition for ‘genuine stalking’ (Narud & Dahl, 2015). The Canadian survey (Adams et al., 2009), which had a similar response rate (41.3%) to the current study, asked respondents to complete the questionnaire, if they had ‘ever been harassed’ as a result of their public position, 26% of federal politicians indicating that they had been subject to ‘criminal harassment’. The problem with this approach is that requiring respondents to be aware of definitions of harassment and to consider them applicable to their own cases is likely to result in an underestimate of the size of the problem compared with the method used in the current study (Wooster et al., 2013).

Limitations

The current survey had a response rate of 38%. Whilst this is apparently ‘unusually good’ in terms of UK MPs’ response rates to surveys (Serjeant-at-Arms,
personal communication), it raises the question as to whether only those who had experienced the behaviours set out in the questionnaire had responded, making the true prevalence of intrusive/aggressive behaviours lower than the survey suggests. Yet, even if it were the case that not a single non-responder had suffered any intrusive behaviours, the results of the survey would still indicate that 31% of all MPs had been affected.

It is evidently impossible to know why individuals do not respond to surveys, unless they are asked. We asked 15 non-responders the reasons for their not responding; all said that they had been unaware of the survey. A number of the responders with whom we conducted follow-up interviews told us that they did not necessarily see all inappropriate/aggressive correspondence, as their mail is filtered by their staff before being passed to them: the survey may simply not have reached some MPs. In the survey of the New Zealand parliament (Every-Palmer et al., 2015), the most common reason given for non-participation was lack of time: this may well also have been a factor with UK MPs at Westminster. The authors of the Norwegian survey were aware of ‘prominent politicians who are publicly known to have been exposed to serious threats and incidents who have chosen not to respond to the survey’ (Bjelland & Bjørgo, 2014). The same applied to the current survey of UK MPs. There is also the possibility that differences in personality and in public prominence may have discouraged some MPs from returning the questionnaire. It touched upon highly personal subjects which some MPs may have been less disposed to be open about than others: and the more prominent the public profile, the more cautious an MP may have been about offering such information. There is also evidence (see companion paper, James et al., 2015) that some MPs blamed themselves for being victims and others were very distressed by their experiences, both these being factors which might discourage individuals subject to aggressive/intrusive experiences from completing the survey.

In the current survey, some basic characteristics of the non-anonymous responders were compared with figures for the parliament as a whole: sex, age, political party and whether the MP had been in parliament for less than five years. There were no major disparities, indicating that the group who responded to the survey were representative of MPs as a whole in terms of these background factors, as was the case in the Norwegian sample (Bjelland & Bjørgo, 2014). Finally, note must be taken of the striking similarities in results between UK MPs and those of the New Zealand parliament, where the response rate was 84%. This was not only in terms of the overall prevalence of intrusive/aggressive behaviours, but also in terms of the prevalence of each behaviour and their relative ranking. This supports the idea that the sample in this UK survey may have been broadly representative of UK Westminster MPs as a whole.

In terms of the semi-structured interviews, these involved the usual limitations common to this research method, including the influence of question choice, dependence on the skills of the interviewer(s) and the potential for the
analysis of the material to be biased towards matters of particular interest to the researchers.

Other limitations were that the survey design only allowed some data items to be gathered about the incident which stuck out the most to each MP. This created some difficulties in the analysis, it not being possible for instance to ascertain how many MPs who had been stalked had separately been harassed by entirely different individuals. This is likely to have led to an underestimate of the proportion of MPs suffering harassment. In addition, the conservative approach taken to missing data in terms of fear and duration means that the prevalence figures for stalking and harassment amongst those who did respond are likely to be an underestimate. Finally, the survey concerned matters of a sensitive nature. It was inevitable that some MPs would have chosen to answer anonymously, which reduced the completeness of data for some items in the returned surveys.

Any future research in this area would benefit from the questionnaire being completed by MPs through face-to-face interview and from the inclusion of data from secondary sources, such as office staff or spouses, both as regards the MPs’ experiences and (a separate, but important issue), their own.

**Conclusions**

Stalking and harassment of members of parliament appears to be a common experience. This is of concern for several reasons. Stalking and harassment are psychologically destructive and take a toll on the victims in terms of personal suffering and changes to lifestyle (Kuehner, Gass, & Dressing, 2007; Thomas, Purcell, Pathé, & Mullen, 2008). The effects of intrusive/aggressive behaviours on MPs are considered in the second part of this study (James et al., 2015). In addition, there are concerns that intrusive/aggressive behaviours might interfere with the democratic process (Bjelland & Bjørø, 2014). Of most importance, the prevalence of such behaviours is evidence of the need for systems to be in place to assess and manage risk arising from aggressive/intrusive behaviours towards MPs, the main risk of serious harm to politicians coming from lone actors who frequently exhibit ‘warning behaviours’ in the form of intrusive/aggressive behaviours before they carry out a definitive act (James et al., 2007, 2013). In the UK, the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre was set up to assess and manage the risks from those who engage in inappropriate communications or approaches to politicians and members of the Royal Family. Whereas the efficacy of this model has been demonstrated (James et al., 2010) and it is now being taken up elsewhere, including in Queensland and shortly in New Zealand, its weakness is that relies upon intrusive/aggressive behaviours towards its subjects being brought to its attention. The current study illustrates the magnitude of the problem and identifies a need to educate both politicians and their staff about the importance of referring suitable cases for assessment. Further research into these issues is needed and will require financial support: the current study was unfunded.
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