What Predicts Where Convicted Sex Offenders Live? An Examination of Census Tract Data in Minnesota

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Sex Offenders Living Among Us

• Sex offenders living in the community have long been a source of fear, concern, anxiety, etc.
• Over the last few decades, efforts to control sexual offending have focused on repeat offenders
  • As opposed to first-time offenders
    • Most sex offenses are committed by “first-time” offenders
  • Legislation has attempted to increase the risk and costs associated with sexual offending
  • Much of focus has involved tracking where they live
    • Registration
    • Community Notification
    • Residence Restrictions
Offender Residential Patterns

- Many prisoners come from, and return to, socially disorganized communities
  - Social Disorganization = breakdown of local peer networks, informal social control and collective efficacy
    - Residents in these communities interact less with one another
    - Limited investment in neighborhood
    - Unwilling/unable to respond to local issues, including crime

- Social disorganized communities marked by:
  - Above-average rates of poverty
  - High residential turnover
  - Racial/ethnic heterogeneity
  - More disrupted households
  - Below-average rates of high school graduation
  - Higher crime rates
More than Concentrated Disadvantage

- A strong predictor of higher concentrations of ex-offenders in a community is concentrated disadvantage
  - More poverty, unemployment, female-headed households, etc.
- Research has also shown that concentrated affluence is a buffer against harmful outcomes, including crime
- Studies looking at extreme income segregation have found:
  - Presence of affluent neighbors had significant effect on individual-level childhood development
  - Affluence influences informal surveillance of neighborhood children
  - Affluence associated with increased willingness to engage in reciprocal relationships
Sex Offender Residential Patterns

• Sex offenders generally have it worse than other offenders
• Move into neighborhoods with higher levels of disadvantage and residential instability  
  • Greater propensity for downward residential mobility
• Live in areas with more concentrated disadvantage, available housing and affordable housing
• Residential patterns also affected by
  • Residence restrictions
  • Registration requirements
  • Community notification
Sex Offenders in Minnesota

- There is no statewide residence restrictions law
  - Several cities/towns have passed their own ordinances
    - Applies only to Level 3 offenders
- State has had a registration requirement since 1991
- Community notification varies by risk level and applies only to sex offenders released from prison
  - Level 1 = “low public risk”; limited notification
  - Level 2 = “moderate public risk”; somewhat limited notification
  - Level 3 = “high public risk”; broad public notification
  - Big difference in notification between Level 3 and Levels 1 and 2
  - About 15% of released sex offenders are assigned a Level 3
    - Level 2 = 30%
    - Level 1 = 55%
Present Study

- Impetus: Some local communities have expressed concern about being a “dumping ground” for RSOs
  - Especially Level 3 sex offenders
- Examined residential address data on 9,894 registered sex offenders
  - 3,362 had a risk level (i.e., had been to prison)
    - 70% = Level 1
    - 25% = Level 2
    - 5% = Level 3
- Connected these data to 2010 Census tract data
- Analyzed effects of community-level factors on sex offender concentration
  - Examined entire state
  - Included measures of concentrated affluence
    - Index of concentrated extremes (ICE)
  - Assessed effects of community notification
**Dependent Measures**

1. Rate per 1,000 residents of all RSO’s in Minnesota
   - Calculated for each of the 1,329 census tracts in MN

2. Rate per 1,000 residents of all Level 1 and 2 sex offenders in Minnesota
   - Calculated for each of the 1,329 census tracts in MN

3. Binary measure of whether a Level 3 offender was residing in a census tract
   - Used a dichotomous measure due to relatively low number of Level 3 offenders in the state.
   - A majority of the neighborhoods (1,211) did not have a single Level 3 offender
   - A majority of the 118 neighborhoods with a Level 3 offender had only one
Independent Measures

- Used the following independent variables in the statistical models
  - Concentrated disadvantage
    - % w/ children under 18 headed by single female
    - % under poverty line
    - % unemployed
    - % receiving public assistance
    - % without secondary degree
  - Index of concentrated extremes (ICE)
    - (Number of affluent families – Number of poor families)/total # of families
    - Value ranges from -1 (all are poor) to +1 (all are affluent)
  - Residential instability
  - Housing affordability
  - Housing availability
  - Population density
  - Racial (% non-white)
  - Ethnic heterogeneity
Results for all RSOs

• Used two-stage least squares regression model
• Controlled for spatial autocorrelation
• Findings
  • ICE was strongest predictor
  • 45 percent decrease in RSO rate
  • More affluence = fewer RSOs
  • Concentrated disadvantage = 9 percent increase in RSO rate
  • More affordable housing and greater housing availability were positively associated with RSO rate
  • Cheap rents and more available units = more RSOs
  • Population density and ethnic heterogeneity = negatively associated
  • Percent non-white was positively associated in models that included ICE measure
  • No significant effects for residential instability
Results for Level 1 and Level 2 Sex Offenders

- Used two-stage least squares regression model
- Controlled for spatial autocorrelation
- Findings
  - ICE was, once again, the strongest predictor
  - 24 percent decrease in Level 1 and 2 rate
  - Concentrated disadvantage = 6 percent increase in Level 1 and 2 rate
  - More affordable housing and greater housing availability were positively associated with Level 1 and 2 rate
  - Significant effects not observed for residential instability, population density and ethnic heterogeneity
  - Percent non-white was positively associated in models that included ICE measure
Results for Level 3 Sex Offenders

• Used Probit Regression Model
• Controlled for spatial autocorrelation
• Findings
  • ICE was the strongest predictor
  • 93 percent decrease in probability of Level 3 living in neighborhood
  • Concentrated disadvantage did not have a significant effect after controlling for spatial autocorrelation
  • Only other significant predictor was percent non-white
  • Positively associated with probability of Level 3
  • Significant effects not observed for residential instability, housing affordability, housing availability, population density and ethnic heterogeneity
What the Results Mean

• Not much difference between all RSO and Level 1 and Level 2 results
  • Concentrated disadvantage, more affordable housing, great housing availability and % non-white = more RSOs
  • Concentrated affluence = fewer RSOs

• Difficult to compare these results with those from Level 3
  • Differences in analytical technique and how DV was measured

• But ICE was only measure that was a significant predictor in all 3 models
Why are Extreme Levels of Wealth/Poverty Important?

- Concentrated disadvantage helps explain why some communities have more RSOs
  - Impoverished neighborhoods = diminished access to important resources
  - Generally lack shared expectations for collective action
  - Least able to effectively resist presence of RSOs in their community
The Protective Effects of Affluence

- But concentrated disadvantage doesn’t tell whole story
- More affluence = more social capital and collective efficacy
  - Possess means and resources to drive out RSOs
    - Sex offender concentration lowers home values
    - Inflames concern for child protection
  - Reason for residence restriction laws
Closing Thoughts

• Sex offender concentration not associated with increased victimization of children
  • But higher rates of sexual offending against adults
• If concentration is considered a problem, no easy solutions
  • Residential patterns deeply embedded within social and economic structure
• Study is currently under review
  • Clark, Valerie and Grant Duwe (forthcoming). What Predicts Where Sex Offenders Live? An Examination of Census Tract Data in Minnesota