

The Impact of Sex Offender Residence Restrictions: 1,000 Feet From Danger or One Step From Absurd?

Jill S. Levenson
Leo P. Cotter

Abstract: *Several states have enacted public policies that prohibit sex offenders who have abused children from living within close proximity to a school, park, day care center, or school bus stop. The purpose of this exploratory study was to describe the impact of residence restrictions on sex offender reintegration and to better understand sex offenders' perceptions of these laws. A survey of 135 sex offenders in Florida was conducted. Most of the molesters who responded to the survey indicated that housing restrictions increased isolation, created financial and emotional stress, and led to decreased stability. Respondents also indicated that they did not perceive residence restrictions as helpful in risk management and, in fact, reported that such restrictions may inadvertently increase triggers for reoffense. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.*

Keywords: *sex offender; 1,000-ft rule; proximity; residence restrictions; reintegration; rehabilitation*

Public concern about the threat posed by sex offenders has inspired varied legislation designed to combat recidivistic sexual violence. For example, policies mandating sex offender registration, community notification, civil commitment, castration, “three-strikes and you’re out,” and nondiscretionary sentencing have been introduced. The newest wave of such statutes has come in the form of laws controlling where sex offenders can live. These restrictions prohibit sex offenders from residing within specific distances from schools or places where children congregate.

Thus far, 14 states (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Tennessee) have enacted buffer zones that prohibit sex offenders from residing within close proximity to a school, park, day care center, or school bus stop. The least restrictive distance requirement is in Illinois (500 ft), but most common are 1,000- to 2,000-ft boundaries. California law does not allow certain sex offenders on parole to live within a quarter mile of an elementary school and prohibits parolees from living within 35 miles of a victim or witness.

There have been only a few studies investigating the relationship between housing and sex offending, and the results are mixed. In Arkansas, it was found that 48% of child molesters lived in close proximity to schools, day care centers, or parks compared with 26% of perpetrators convicted of sex crimes against adult victims (Walker, Golden, & VanHouten, 2001). The authors speculated that molesters who were motivated to reoffend might be more likely to purposely place themselves in close access to potential child victims. However, in Colorado it was found that molesters who reoffended while under supervision were randomly scattered throughout the study area and did not seem to live closer than nonrecidivists to schools or child care centers (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004). In Minnesota, sex offenders' proximity to schools or parks was not a factor in recidivism, nor did it affect community safety (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2003). In fact, the opposite was found to be true: A sex offender was more likely to travel to another neighborhood in which he could seek victims without being recognized.

Public safety and child protection are understandably the primary considerations when sex offender restrictions are imposed. However, concerns have been raised that such mandates might exacerbate the shortage of housing options for sex offenders and force them to move to rural areas where they would be increasingly isolated with few employment and treatment options (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2003). The dispersal of parks and schools may lead to overlapping restriction zones thus making it essentially impossible for sex offenders in some cities to find suitable housing. In some urban areas, offenders might be forced to cluster in high-crime neighborhoods. Such restrictions can lead to homelessness and transience, which interfere with effective tracking, monitoring, and close probationary supervision. Other scholars have concurred that sex offender statutes inadvertently may increase risk by aggravating the stressors (e.g., isolation, disempowerment, shame, depression, anxiety, lack of social supports) that can trigger some sex offenders to relapse (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996). The Colorado study recommended that residence restrictions do not appear to be a viable method for controlling sexual offender recidivism (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004).

Although sexual predator statutes are based on the presumption that sex offenders are repeatedly arrested in alarmingly high numbers, research suggests that sex offense recidivism rates are lower than commonly believed (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). As well, ambiguity about the effectiveness of sex offender treatment (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989) has led to pessimistic attitudes about the possibility of rehabilitation despite recent research suggesting more promising results (Hanson et al., 2002). Over the past decade, great gains have been made in the ability to assess and identify high-risk sex offenders (Epperson et al., 1999; Hanson, 1997; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 1998, 2001; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Hanson & Thornton, 1999). Unfortunately, such research has not been consistently incorporated into policy development or implementation.

Most states continue to tighten their restrictions of sex offenders, whereas only a few states have questioned the benefits and consequences of proximity statutes. Recently, a U.S. District Court of Appeals judge in Iowa declared such restrictions unconstitutional and ordered that Iowa's statute, which prohibited sex offenders from living within a restricted zone of 2,000 ft, not be enforced (*Doe v. Miller & White*, 2004). The court opined that the law was punitive, it imposed restraints leading to housing disadvantages for sex offenders, and it hindered the right to conduct family affairs without interference from the state. Although the court noted that the public has a reasonable interest in restricting sex offenders' access to children, it found that the law went beyond what is necessary to protect the community and cited the lack of research indicating a relationship between proximity and recidivism. Constitutional issues notwithstanding, the impact of such statutes on offenders and communities remains largely unknown.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this exploratory study was twofold: to describe the impact of residence requirements on sex offender reintegration and to better understand sex offenders' perceptions of such restrictions. Specific hypotheses were not tested, but, using quantitative and qualitative techniques, the study attempted to ascertain (a) the proportion of sex offenders who report having suffered adverse effects as a result of housing restrictions and (b) the opinions of sex offenders about the utility of such restrictions. Florida was considered an ideal venue in which to conduct such research, because its residency limitations (often referred to as *1,000-ft rules*) are quite restrictive and have been in effect since 1997. The study was considered important because it can help policy makers to better understand the positive and negative, intended and unintended, consequences of proximity legislation. Such data ultimately can inform the development of evidence-based social policy and contribute to the effective management of sex offenders in the community.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

A nonrandom sample ($N = 135$) was drawn from a pool of sex offenders from two outpatient sex offender counseling centers in Fort Lauderdale, Florida ($n = 40$) and Tampa, Florida ($n = 95$). All clients attending treatment at the facilities were invited to complete a survey about the impact of sexual offender policies on their community reintegration. Out of those who voluntarily completed the survey ($n = 183$), this sample was made up of 135 who indicated that they were subject to residency restrictions. Clients had been on probation for an average of 40

months (median = 32 months, $SD = 37$ months). Slightly more than half had been in their current treatment group for 2 years or less, and 47% had been in treatment for more than 2 years.

Most of the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 64; 10% were younger than 25, and 6% were age 65 or older. About 68% were White, 14% were Black, 14% were Hispanic, and 4% described their race as "other." Marital status included 24% who were currently married with 35% reporting that they had never been married, 37% stating that they were divorced or separated, and 4% describing themselves as widowed. More than one third of the participants had graduated from high school (19%) or obtained a General Equivalency Diploma (16%), 33% had attended some college, and 14% were college graduates. About 77% reported an annual household income of less than \$30,000 per year. About 97% were identified as child molesters. The remaining 3% identified themselves as having an index victim older than the age of 18, although they had minor victims as well. Other reported offenses included voyeurism (9%), exposure (13%), and computer-related sex crimes (9%). The percentages do not add up to 100% because about 20% of participants endorsed more than one type of offense. Offender and victim characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

In Florida, residence restrictions apply only to sex offenders who were sentenced after October 1, 1997, for crimes involving victims younger than the age of 18 (*Special Conditions of Sex Offender Probation*, 1997). At the time of the data collection, the conditions of probationary supervision in Florida precluded sex offenders with minor victims from living within 1,000 ft of a school, day care center, park, playground, or other place where children regularly congregate. Shortly after the data were collected, Florida's law was amended by adding school bus stops to the list of prohibitions for child molesters released from prison (*Conditional Release Program*, 2004).

INSTRUMENTATION

A survey was designed by the authors for the purpose of collecting data regarding the impact of residence restrictions on sex offenders. Client demographic data and information regarding offense history were elicited using forced-choice categorical responses to ensure anonymity. Participants were asked to rate 3-point and 5-point Likert scales indicating their degree of agreement with the issue in question and were also given the opportunity to provide narrative responses.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Clients were invited to complete the survey during a group therapy session. Respondents were instructed not to write their names on the survey and to place the completed questionnaire in a sealed box with a slot opening. The research was conducted in accordance with federal guidelines for the ethical treatment of human participants.

TABLE 1
OFFENDER AND VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS

| <i>Offender</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Age</i> | |
| Younger than 25 | 10% |
| 25-64 | 84% |
| 65 or older | 6% |
| <i>Race</i> | |
| White | 68% |
| Minority | 32% |
| Currently married | 24% |
| <i>Education</i> | |
| High school or equivalent | 35% |
| Attended college or college graduate | 47% |
| <i>Victim</i> | |
| <i>Victim age</i> | |
| Younger than 5 | 6% |
| Age 6-12 | 37% |
| Minor teen | 54% |
| <i>Relationship</i> | |
| Extrafamilial only | 67% |
| Intrafamilial only | 20% |
| Both extra- and intrafamilial | 12% |
| <i>Gender</i> | |
| Male only | 14% |
| Female only | 77% |
| Both genders | 11% |

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive and correlational statistics were used to interpret the quantitative results of the survey. Data analyses were conducted using SPSS version 12.

RESULTS

Overall, 50% of the respondents reported that proximity restrictions had forced them to move from a residence in which they were living, and 25% indicated that they were unable to return to their residence after their conviction (see Table 2). Nearly half reported that residence restrictions prevented them from living with supportive family members. A considerable proportion reported that the

TABLE 2
IMPACT OF RESIDENCE RESTRICTIONS ($N = 135$)

| <i>Item</i> | <i>Yes</i> |
|---|------------|
| I have had to move out of a home that I owned because of the 1,000-ft rule. | 22% |
| I have had to move out of an apartment that I rented because of the 1,000-ft rule. | 28% |
| When released from prison, I was unable to return to my home. | 25% |
| I have been unable to live with supportive family members because of the 1,000-ft rule. | 44% |
| I find it difficult to find affordable housing because of the 1,000-ft rule. | 57% |
| I have suffered financially because of the 1,000-ft rule. | 48% |
| I have suffered emotionally because of the 1,000-ft rule. | 60% |

geographical limitations created a financial hardship for them, and nearly 60% agreed or strongly agreed that they have suffered emotionally because of the restrictions.

Age was significantly related ($p < .05$) to being unable to live with family ($r = -.17$) and difficulty finding affordable housing ($r = -.19$) with younger offenders being more likely to report these events. There was also a significant inverse relationship between being married and the inability to find affordable housing ($r = -.19$), and minority race was related to having to move from a residence ($r = .20$). There was no significant relationship between adverse events and income, education, or length of time on probation.

In addition to the structured survey responses, narrative comments were also examined. There were 2 respondents who agreed that residency restrictions were a deterrent to offending, commenting, "It doesn't tempt you" and "It's good because you can't just walk from your home to a school." Overwhelmingly, however, the participants reported that they did not find the 1,000-ft rule to be practical or helpful, although some suggested that such restrictions should be imposed on a case-by-case basis. Several common themes emerged.

Importantly, many offenders emphasized their need for social support and believed their risk increased with isolation from supportive family and friends. For example, they commented, "I believe you have a better chance of recovery by living with supportive family members" and "What helps me is having support people around. . . . Isolating me is not helpful." Another respondent expressed distress that geographical restrictions kept him from living with and caring for his infirm mother. One reported concern at having to live alone because of the location of his family's home, and several young adults said they were unable to live with parents and younger siblings after committing what they referred to as a "statutory" offense. Some respondents indicated that they had to relocate several times, and one said he was forced to move to a "ghetto."

On the other hand, several participants reported that they had successfully petitioned the court for an exception to the rule and were then allowed to reside within 1,000 ft of a school. Such requests to the court were reportedly initiated for various reasons, the most common being home ownership or a desire to reside with family. What was most remarkable about these exceptions is that they were seemingly granted in the absence of an assessment of risk or relevant offender characteristics. They seemed to be based solely on the offender's request that the court eliminate a hardship created by the statute.

The majority of respondents emphatically proclaimed that the 1,000-ft rule would have no effect on their risk of reoffense. Many pointed out the need for internal motivation to prevent reoffense and said that if a sex abuser wanted to reoffend, the rule would not stop him. Their comments included "has no effect at all on offending," "does not make an impact on my life," "I follow the rule, but it has had little impact," "It's a childish rule," "You can walk as far as you want if that [child abuse] is what you're after," "Living 1,000 ft away compared to 900 ft doesn't prevent anything," and "It doesn't matter where a sex offender lives if he sets his mind on reoffending. . . . He can just get closer by walking or driving. The 1,000-rule is just a longer leash, I don't see the point."

Many opined that if an offender is not committed to treatment and recovery, "the 1,000-ft rule is inconsequential. If a person wants to offend, it doesn't matter how close he is to a convenient place to find kids." Another pointed out that "if a person wants to reoffend, he will, regardless of what laws are made up or what treatment they go through. . . . It's entirely up to him." Referring to his victim empathy training received in therapy, one offender suggested that some exposure to children might be a good thing: "When I see kids in the park, I can see them as real people with real lives and real feelings, not just an object."

Other respondents were somewhat more analytical and thoughtful about the issue. One questioned if there is a "link between sex offending and distance from schools," and another suggested that "resources would be better used by identifying dangerous individuals who [*sic*] the rule should apply to."

Noteworthy is that many respondents pointed out that they have always been careful not to reoffend in close proximity to their homes, so geographical restrictions provided little deterrence. The rule "serves no purpose but to give some people the illusion of safety," said one respondent. Others expressed similar sentiments: "I think that if someone wanted to reoffend, then they would do it at a place away from home instead of putting themselves at more risk of getting caught [near home]." Another reported, "It is better for me not to have sexual contact with neighborhood kids—less chance of being recognized," and others agreed, "Most people would worry more about being caught in their own neighborhood." One offender wryly noted, "I never noticed how many schools and parks there were until I had to stay away from them."

Some participants pointed out the myth of *stranger danger*: “It doesn’t matter where you live; most offenses happen with someone you know or live with.” Another commented, “Most abuse happens in homes or with family or close friends, not at bus stops or schools.” Although acknowledging that they would be unlikely to abduct a child from a school or park, they did point out a chilling and ironic reality: “You can live next door to a minor but not a school,” said one offender, and another agreed, “You don’t want me to live near a school where the kids are when I’m at work. The way it is now, when I get home from work, they’re home, too—right next door.” One offender asked, “What is the point if the houses on your same block are full of kids?” Another offender noted a similar and equally illogical experience:

I couldn’t live in an adult mobile home park because a church was 880 ft away and had a children’s class that met once a week. I was forced to move to a motel where right next door to my room was a family with three children—but it qualified under the rule.

DISCUSSION

Most of the molesters who responded to this survey indicated that housing restrictions increased isolation, created financial and emotional hardship, and led to decreased stability. The data further suggested that offenders do not perceive residence restrictions as helpful in risk management. Although this study did not measure risk or recidivism, the findings appear to confirm prior speculation that proximity rules might increase the types of stressors that can trigger reoffense (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2003). Research regarding dynamic risk has indicated that a lack of positive social support and depressed mood, anger, and hostility are all associated with recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 1998, 2001). Restricting lower risk offenders unnecessarily, in ways that potentially interfere with their recovery, may be counter-productive. In Colorado, it was found that sex offenders who had more social support had a lower number of probation violations (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004).

On the other hand, sexual interest in children and access to victims are factors also associated with recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 1998, 2001; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004), so it makes sense that risk might be managed by reducing some molesters’ exposure to children and prohibiting them from living near places where children congregate. However, blanket restrictions may fail to address individualized risk factors that are related to potential offending patterns. For example, proximity laws are usually designated only for sex offenders convicted of child molestation, even though research suggests that up to 50% of rapists have committed undetected sex crimes against child victims (Ahlmeyer, Heil,

McKee, & English, 2000). It is well established that most sex offenders have many more victims (and a variety of victims) than those for which they have been arrested (Abel et al., 1987; Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittleman, & Rouleou, 1988; Ahlmeyer et al., 2000; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003), and therefore, some may pose risks not readily apparent by relying solely on their documented offense history.

What we can learn from these sex offenders' responses is that they will circumvent restrictions if they are determined to reoffend. Therefore, restrictions must be sensible and feasible and should be based on a thorough assessment of past offense patterns and current risk factors. Practitioners and probation officers should collaborate in determining treatment plans and supervision restrictions that are most applicable to individual offenders' needs and risks. Noteworthy is that several respondents in our study had successfully petitioned the court for a modification of residence restrictions, seemingly without an assessment of risk by the treatment provider or probation officer. Restrictions are likely to be most effective when combined with appropriate assessment, support, monitoring, and rehabilitation. A more individualized approach to sex offender management can enhance public safety while promoting successful reintegration for offenders.

This study was preliminary and exploratory, and it was limited by the inherent problems of self-reported data. The data were collected from two large, metropolitan areas in Florida and therefore probably reflect urban implementation statewide but may fail to capture other problems or benefits more specific to rural communities. It is unknown whether these results can be generalized to other states, and continued research will assist us to more fully understand the national impact of residence restrictions on sex offender reintegration. Ultimately, empirical investigation must clarify the effect of proximity restrictions on recidivism to determine whether such policies are successful in achieving their stated goals.

Prevention of sexual violence requires a well-planned, comprehensive, interdisciplinary response that begins with developing clear goals and objectives, implementing strategies based on empirical research, and collecting and analyzing data on an ongoing basis (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2002). Some states (Minnesota and Colorado) have elected to study the relationship between housing and recidivism before implementing proximity restrictions. These states ultimately determined that the potential benefits of such legislation do not seem to outweigh the possible negative consequences. Social policy should be solidly grounded in empirical evidence and informed by theoretical literature. It is clear that public concern about sexual crimes sometimes leads to legislation that is not driven by data or science but rather by outrage and fear. Scientists and practitioners have a responsibility to assist lawmakers to respond to the problem of sexual violence by advocating for the development of evidence-based policies that protect women and children and rehabilitate perpetrators as well.

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Jill S. Levenson, Ph.D.

Center for Offender Rehabilitation and Education
5950 W. Oakland Park Blvd., Suite 107
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida 33313
USA
E-mail: jsljwm@bellsouth.net

Leo P. Cotter, Ph.D.

S.H.A.R.E.
7819 N. Dale Mabry, Suite 212
Tampa, Florida 33614-3267
USA