

# Testing of Apparent Child Sex Offender Clustering

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## Abstract

During a previous research project, the authors of this work noticed an apparent clustering of registered child sexual offenders as reflected by street addresses. The following research seeks to determine whether or not this effect is real or apparent. If this correlation exists, does it further relate to income levels of the neighborhood as established by the 2000 U.S. Census data? Since child sexual offenders are known to be present in every income strata, this finding would support a long standing Criminological hypothesis that those without financial resources are more likely to be convicted (and registered as offenders) than wealthier offenders. Mapping of registered sexual offenders and corresponding income level by census block comparison is of the Chicago, IL, Metroplex region.

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While doing research for a previous article on a database containing all registered sexual offenders' names, addresses, and general descriptors in the state of Illinois, researchers began to notice and remark upon how often the same street would show up for different offenders. This seemed strange, and called into question whether the effect both authors noticed was real or only apparent. At that time, their work focused on the accuracy of the information contained in the registry and whether or not the offenders listed were in compliance with the geographic prohibitions established by law (e.g., convicted child sexual offenders can not live within 500 feet of a daycare center, school, or park) (Clontz and Mericle, 2002). But this apparent clustering of sexual offenders initially seemed consistent, and merited further exploration.

A search was initiated for information regarding this effect, with an emphasis on discovering any academic or other mention of such phenomenon. A plethora of articles were found dealing with the issue of child sexual abusers. Written materials range from those appearing in refereed academic journals to those amounting to inflammatory, "kill 'em all, let God sort them out" rhetoric appearing on the worldwide web. A quick perusal of the topics leads the reader from issue to issue, and if viewed with an eye to chronology, definite trends establish themselves.

One clear trend is the continuing debate over whose rights are those in authority supposed to be protecting. Is publishing the names and other general information about convicted child sexual offenders preventing further heinous crimes against children or simply encouraging discriminatory acts against those who have already served their time? Do the "Scarlet Letter" laws even have much impact? Both proponents and opponents of both Megan's Law and the Wetterling Act argue the impact of the laws requiring mandatory registration and community notification of convicted sexual offenders. As the laws are already in force, this work takes the stance that for the current research, the point is moot, preferring to explore the reality created by the laws' existence.

Another topic of great concern is the need to prevent abuse, not simply respond to it once it has occurred. Two preventive approaches seemed logically viable: 1) teach children how to avoid such contact and 2) identify people at risk for committing sexual offenses, particularly those who might prey upon children, and intervene. Currently, neither preventive venue is faring well. Plainly stated, prevention programs aimed at teaching children methods for avoiding sexual abuse are not proving effective (Bolen, 2003; Salter, Richards, Talbot, Hodges, Bentovim, Hastings, Stevenson, and Skuse, 2003). Researchers hoped a more effective strategy would be the proactive prevention approach with potential offenders. There, pun not withstanding, is the rub. The urgent questions are clear. Exactly who is the child sexual offender? What characteristics does he or she have that distinguish them from other members of the community? Unfortunately, identifying potential offenders has proven much more problematic than identifying their potential victims.

What researchers do know about child sexual abusers muddies the already troubled waters of public perceptions. For example, it is known that all pedophiles do not molest children, and that everyone who does sexually abuse a child is not necessarily a pedophile. There are opportunistic sexual offenders who care little about the age of their victims, just their accessibility. To many, this information adds to the general atmosphere of alarm by broadening the pool of possible offenders.

It was hoped by studying groups of convicted offenders, whether pedophiles or opportunistic child sexual abusers, that a set of identifiable characteristics would be recognized that could be used as pointers indicating subjects at high risk for perpetrating such offenses. Review of the work in this area is also disheartening. As far back as 1982, researchers looking at a variety of variables found no significant differences in child sexual abusers and the non-perpetrators in terms of race, intelligence, religion, educational, occupational status or socioeconomic status (Groth, Hobson, and Gary, 1982). In other studies, this non-pattern persists.

A study by Ryan, Miyoshi, Metzner, Krughan, and Fryer (1996) looking at a national sample of sexually abusive youths found sociodemographics very similar to the general population. Wilson and Beville's work (2003) found most child molesters to be, apart from their sexual misconduct, generally law-abiding citizens. They further states that most child molesters are indistinguishable from the rest of the members of the community. As tempting as it is to demonize this class of felons, the facts do not allow anyone to pre-identify even the potential for such offenses. Child sexual abusers do not appear to be the monsters that most assume them to be. Most of them are likable people capable of using their charm to hide both their intentions and activities (Salter, 2003). The sexual abusers of children can literally be anybody, and there is no known method of detecting them before they both commit the crime and are convicted. They represent an invisible danger in the community, one that can manifest anyplace, at any time.

The laws initially requiring child sexual abusers, and more recently, all convicted sexual offenders to register attempts to expose these perpetrators to the scrutiny of the public. Make visible the danger, if one will, for the good of the community and local law enforcement. Unfortunately, problems in the mandatory registration and restricted residential requirements offenders are supposed to follow are common (Clontz and Mericle, 2002). The burden of reporting their address to police agencies upon release from jail or prison falls on the criminal. Many do not, or fail to update addresses in subsequent moves. As California state Senator Dean Florez puts it, "We have an honor system for dishonorable people" (Murr, 2003, p.40).

Even granting that the data in the registries is flawed, research into what the registration data can tell us is still important and should not be neglected. Accuracy of information on offender addresses is required by federal law. If there are problems in getting or maintaining viable records, the cause(s) of the faults needs to be identified and remedied. Also, the existing data contained in the registries, however inaccurate, may give some insight into those convicted of the crime or provide clues or important information about those yet to offend or be convicted. The law has mandated a change in the community physical and social environment where the offender lives. What needs to be discovered is the impact the restrictions may be having on the convicted offenders and its implications.

Possible outcomes of child sex offender registration include the possibility of creating child sexual offender hot spots. By restricting the areas in a community where a convicted child sexual offender may live, the laws could cause a concentration of such offenders in certain neighborhoods. Another possibility is that the conviction for such offenses, with its socioeconomic realities, works in tandem with residency restrictions, creating an artificial saturation of such offenders in economically depressed sections of communities. Only research into the child sexual offender registries will generate answers these kinds of questions.

## **Methodology**

During a previous research project (Clontz and Mericle, 2002), the authors of this work noticed an apparent clustering of registered child sexual offenders as reflected by street addresses. The planned work could not be accomplished at this time due to two limitations. First, the researchers were unable to locate median income for census blocks at this point in time. Therefore, the research is unable to address the socioeconomic factors as related to child sex offenders residency. Second, the initial research plan was to examine the 9 counties in the Chicago Metroplex. Table 1 shows the 9 counties in Illinois that comprise the

Chicago MSA, along with the total number of registered sex offenders according to the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry (June, 2004).

Table 1: Chicago MSA Counties and Total Number of Registered Sex Offenders (N=6,482)

County Name	# of Registered Offenders	County Name	# of Registered Offenders	County Name	# of Registered Offenders
Cook	4,678	Grundy	30	Lake	550
DeKalb	73	Kane	338	McHenry	151
DuPage	301	Kendall	35	Will	326

From the 6, 482 people that were registered sex offenders within these 9 counties, 366 people were removed from the sample due to problems with data entry. For example, a majority of the counties had a number of individuals listed as child sex offenders that showed "UNK" as an address. Since child sexual offenders are required to register within 10 days of establishing residency with the police or sheriff's agency within the jurisdiction where they reside, these cases indicate a legal violation. While interesting to note, such cases obviously had to be dropped from the sample. Two hundred and fifty-six cases fell into this category. Other cases excluded from the sample are those where the offender was listed as "moving" (30). Also, some of the offenders were listed as residing at various county jails (49) or the Illinois Department of Corrections (28). Again, these cases were excluded, as were cases where a person's only displayed address was "HOMELESS" (3).

Next, the researchers removed the adult sex offenders (1,106) or cases that did not list the age of the victim (44) from this data set. These changes resulted in the data set dropping to 4,966 registered child sex offenders (offenses having victims under the age of 18) for the 9 county Metropolitan Chicago area.

After the initial mapping run, 1,127 more cases could not be matched by geocoding. There are several possible factors that can account for these missing cases. Even though legally required to bring some form of documentation to verify their place of dwelling, offenders could still find ways to supply a false or fictitious address. Even more likely, whoever entered the information made a mistake when typing in the location. Another possibility that was noticed by the researchers was the wide variation in abbreviations that were present in the data, making it more difficult for the computer to match the actual location with the reported addresses. These cases also were removed from the sample, leaving 3,839 offender locations for testing purposes.

Once the data was reduced to this point, the second problem was discovered. Due to the massive size of the combined data set and ArcView 9 mapping program, the computer did not have enough memory to identify and plot more than 30 cases at a time without "crashing" the program. On the surface, the plotting request looks relatively simple, but the operation is much more complex than it would appear. What the computer must do is map each individual offender address, draw a 500 foot radius around each registered residence, and check for any other offenders' radius intersecting with any other offender radius perimeter. Eight of the Chicago Metroplex counties could not be run, however Grundy county did work because of its sample size.

Therefore, Grundy county was used to determine the feasibility of continuing this avenue of research. Grundy county in Illinois, is one of the nine counties that comprise the Chicago MSA. The child sexual offender data is drawn from the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry (June, 2004). According to the Illinois State Police, Grundy County contained a total of 30 registered child sex offenders. After the initial mapping run, 6 cases could not be matched by geocoding. There are several possible factors that can account for these missing cases. Even though legally required to bring some form of documentation to verify their place of dwelling, offenders could still find ways to supply a false or fictitious address. Even more likely, whoever entered the information made a mistake when typing in the location. Another possibility that was noticed by the researchers was the wide variation in abbreviations that were present in the data, making it more difficult for the computer to match the actual location with the reported addresses. These cases also were removed from the sample, leaving 24 offender locations for testing purposes. Please note here that as of June 24, 1997 Illinois increased the scope of its mandatory registration to include all certified (convicted) sex offenders. Sex offenses that qualify the offender for registration under the 720 Illinois Compiled Statutes 5/

11-6: indecent solicitation of a child  
11-9.1: sexual exploitation of a child  
11-15.1: soliciting for a juvenile prostitute  
11-17.1: keeping a place of juvenile prostitution  
11-18.1: patronizing a juvenile prostitute  
11-19.1: juvenile pimping  
11-19.1: exploitation of a child  
11-20.1: child pornography  
12-13: criminal sexual assault  
12-14: aggravated criminal sexual assault  
12-14.1: predatory criminal sexual assault of a child  
12-15: criminal sexual abuse  
12-16: aggravated criminal sexual abuse  
12-33: ritualized abuse of a child

Additionally, if any of the following offenses are committed against victims under 18 years of age, and the defendant is not the parent of the victim, and the offense was committed on or after January 1 of 1996:

10-1: kidnapping  
10-2: aggravated kidnapping  
10-3: unlawful restraint  
10-4: aggravated unlawful restraint

Conviction for any of the above listed offenses or their attempt mandates offenders register. Under 720 ILCS 5/12-14.1 , such commissions or attempts require offender registration:

14.1: Predatory Criminal Sexual Assault of a Child

A-1: The victim was under the age of 13 and the offender was 17 years of age or over and committed an act of sexual penetration, or

A-2: When the victim was under 13 and the offender was 17 years of age or older and committed an act of sexual penetration and caused great bodily harm to the victim that resulted in permanent disability or was life threatening

Also included in the sample is described in 725 ILCS 205/10-5 (1.9) - Violations under the Criminal Code of 1961 10-7: Aiding and Abetting under Child Abduction Section 10-5 (b)(10), and Child Luring, 10-5 (b)(10). Registration again in mandatory for both those committing or attempting the crimes.

The last offenses found within the selected cases come under 730 ILCS 150/2 (1.10) are violations or attempted violations of the following crimes of the Criminal Code Of 1961:

10-4: forcible detention, if the victim is under 18 years of age  
11-6.5: indecent solicitation of an adult

11-15: soliciting for a prostitute, if the victim is under 18 years of age

11-16: pandering, if the victim is under 18 years of age

11-18: patronizing a prostitute, if the victim is under 18 years of age

11-19: pimping, if the victim is under 18 years of age

## Mapping Child Sex Offender Addresses

Each of the remaining 24 addresses were individually mapped and then checked for proximity to one another. Of these 24, 4 people were found to live within 500 feet of each other. This area translates into approximately one city block. In other words, one-sixth of the registered offenders live in the same city block.

This exploratory work shows that this is indeed an avenue of research that needs to be conducted. From this limited sample, it could be suggested that child sex offenders live in areas where they would know and be able to interact with other child sex offenders. The preliminary results also bolster the child sexual offender hot spot hypothesis that asserts residency restrictions on offenders may artificially saturate an area with convicted violators.

Additionally, since research is only as good as the information on which it is based, the issue of accuracy of residential information on offenders must be brought up here. The glaring problems discovered by this study again highlight how incorrect and incomplete the data contained in the sex offender registry is. Checking over sex offender registry information will aid departments in meeting one of the mandates of the Wetterling act, which requires jurisdictions to keep an accurate registry. If perusal of the registry information shows incomplete or even impossible addresses, the matter can be rectified. This step also refocuses agencies on dealing with offenders who attempt to offer only a post office box number rather than an actual place of residence. Additionally, the procedure of reviewing the data for mapping can provide information to be passed on to patrol officers about offenders with "UNK" instead of addresses, and follow-up encouraged.

## Conclusion

Obviously, this is a small sample that suffers from all the usual limitations. The data itself is problematic. As seen from the problems of addresses that would not geocode, both accidental and deliberate obfuscation are at work here. Typographic and nomenclature errors on the part of data entry personnel can account for some of the non-coding addresses. Fabrication and falsification of addresses by offenders who are less than enthusiastic about registering is also a real issue. Accuracy for child sex offender registries may be federally mandated, but does not materialize when addresses receive even cursory screening. Better follow-up, while costly in terms of money and personnel, is needed to meet the "law" requirements.

Even given the flawed nature of the data taken from the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry (June, 2004), we still were able to see a pattern, albeit on a small scale. One wonders what is the likelihood in a county of 37,535 people, that of 24 registered offenders with viable, codable addresses, 4 live within one block of each other. If there is a pattern, it is important to determine what causes it: residency restrictions creating hotspots of offenders, a social network of offenders, or socioeconomic necessity. Future research will concentrate on expanding the search for such patterns in other, more densely populated counties, and then look for the possible causes.

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