Study of Balto. Co.: Fewer sex offenses reported in neighborhoods with more registered sex offenders

By Alison Knezevich The Baltimore Sun contact the reporter

Researchers studying Balto. Co. sex offender addresses reach surprising conclusion

Amid a growing national debate over sex offender registries, researchers who studied years of crime data from Baltimore County have released a new finding: Neighborhoods with more registered sex offenders experienced fewer reported sex offenses.

The researchers from Princeton University and the University of Michigan, who chose Baltimore County because it was the first place they found where they could get all the data they sought, say the finding underscores misconceptions about where and how sex crimes are most likely to occur.

"Our assumptions about where risks are located and how to address sex offense victimization may well be premised on faulty assumptions," said J.J. Prescott, a Michigan law professor. "That's the reason why we give information and why people decide to not live in those communities — because the assumption is there's more risk there, and we don't find that to be true."

Notes: All matched Baltimore County RSO addresses (4,988) are depicted. In our analysis, we remove detention facility addresses, resulting in a final tally of 4,123 RSO addresses. (Source: Maryland Sex Offender Registry Unit)

(JJ Prescott and Amanda Agan in Journal of Empirical Legal Studies)

Sex offender registries, which grew in popularity during the 1990s, have faced legal challenges in recent years in Maryland and beyond.

Maryland removed roughly 1,800 names from its registry after a court ruled last year that it couldn't list people whose offenses predated the state's registry law.

Oklahoma purged its registry after a similar ruling. Officials in California said this year they would stop enforcing a provision of that state's law that prohibited offenders from living near schools. And last month, Massachusetts' highest court upheld a judge's decision to throw out a local law that restricts where sex offenders may live.

Prescott and co-author Amanda Y. Agan, a postdoctoral research associate at Princeton, say they wanted to test the assumption that the risk of victimization is higher in places where convicted offenders live — the basis, they say, for laws that mandate registries.

Maryland was one of the few states that was willing to give the researchers past addresses of sex offenders, and county police agreed to share crime data for research purposes.

Agan and Prescott found that each sex offender registered in a neighborhood was associated with 7.5 percent fewer reported sex offenses.

They proposed possible explanations: Sex offender laws appear likely to increase the attractiveness of a registrant's offending away from home, they wrote, and public registries may make residents better able to protect themselves from registered offenders who live nearby.

In "Sex Offender Law and the Geography of Victimization," published in the Journal of Empirical Legal Studies, they pointed out that most sex offenses are not committed by registered offenders, and most sex offenses are not reported.

No charges against Shattuck in Baltimore County

Ryan T. Shields, a scientist at the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said a growing body of research shows state registries have little effect on sexual victimization rates.

He said he was not surprised by the most recent findings. Most sexual abuse is perpetrated by people who know the victim — such as relatives and family friends.

"People who are not registered account for the vast majority of sex offenses in a given year," Shields said. "It's generally people that we know but we love, that are in our lives — that is the context of most cases of child sexual abuse and most cases of sex offending."
One critic of registries called the study a "myth-buster."

"What this is clearly showing is that this runs counter to our fears that if there's a bunch of sex offenders around, we're in mortal danger," said Brenda Jones, executive director of the Elkridge-based Families Advocating Intelligent Registries.

But state Sen. Jim Brochin, a staunch supporter of the state's registry, said it has given families an important tool they need to protect their children.

"We're not going stop every sex offender from doing the horrific things they do, but we have an obligation to our neighbors to make sure they have all the information that the courts and the judicial system have about where these offenders are," the Towson Democrat said. "You have a right to know, when your kids are outside playing, if there are predators nearby."

Adam Rosenberg, executive director of the Baltimore Child Abuse Center, said the findings could show that the registry has made communities more vigilant.

He called the registry "an important tool" but said it must be combined with other efforts, such as teaching adults how to report allegations of sexual abuse.

"The registry is one sliver of the problem," Rosenberg said. "The larger number of people haven't been reported yet."

Molly Shattuck registers as sex offender

Lisae Jordan, executive director of the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said the study shows that registries are effective. When people know a sex offender is in their area, she said, they might be more likely to recognize sexual assault, and to talk to their children about the issue.

Still, she said, very few sex offenders are convicted.

"The real danger of the registry is that it creates a false sense of security," she said. "People mistakenly believe that if they check the registry, they have identified all sex offenders."

Maryland began removing offenders from its registry last year after the state Court of Appeals ruled that including people convicted before the registry was created in 1995 violated the Maryland Constitution's protections against retroactive punishment.

About 1,800 people have been removed from the registry, according to officials. About 6,900 names remain.

Prescott and Agan based their study on crime data and 4,800 addresses of more than 1,500 registered sex offenders in Baltimore County from the 2000s. They did not name the neighborhoods with the most sex offenders or the most sex offenses were reported.

About 790 registered sex offenders live in Baltimore County, according to the state registry.

The researchers wrote that registered offenders in Baltimore County had an average of 2.67 address reports, "a number consistent with research indicating that sex offenders change residences frequently and are more likely to be homeless."

Jones, of FAIR, said many offenders move frequently because they face harassment and have difficulty finding a job.

Sex offender registries have been around since the 1940s, but the idea gained popularity in the 1990s, sparked by outrage over sex crimes committed by convicted offenders.
The Maryland law required offenders to register with police departments, which would make the information available on request.

The state’s registry went online in 2002, making it easier for the public to access the information. A 2006 federal law established a national registry.

Agan and Prescott found that the introduction of the online registry in Maryland in 2002 increased the likelihood of some categories of sex offense being reported in neighborhoods where sex offenders live.

The categories did not include forcible rape or crimes against children. But reports of peeping, pornography offenses and prostitution appeared to have increased dramatically, they found, but neighborhoods with more registered sex offenders still had fewer such reported crimes.

The researchers suggested several explanations. Residents might be more likely to report suspicious activity if they know a sex offender lives nearby, they said. Or knowing about the registered offenders could give people a false sense of security, making them vulnerable to other potential offenders. Or police might focus on "the usual suspects," reducing the chances that an unknown offender is caught.

Cindy McElhinney, director of programs for Darkness to Light, a South Carolina-based group that works to prevent child sexual abuse, warned that registries can "create a false sense of security."

"Only a small percentage of offenders are ever convicted and make it on the registry," she said.

Communities need a comprehensive approach to prevention, she said, and "the sex offender registry is just one tool in a long list of tools that adults need to be armed with to protect children."

Other tools, she said, should include training adults to recognize signs of abuse in children and signs of "grooming" in perpetrators, and helping youth organizations develop policies that minimize opportunities for abuse.

"The sex offender registry was created with a good intention," she said. "As with any system, it has its flaws."

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