

Drake, B., Sohn, Y., Morrison, M., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2021). In what kinds of communities do people on the sex offender registry live? An analysis of ten states. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 127. <https://doi-org.ezp.slu.edu/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106061>

What we know

Federal law requires people convicted of a sexual offense to register their address in public databases. These databases can be searched by anyone in the United States to see if a registered sex offender (RSO) lives close by. Some states and localities include in this law restrictions where a RSOs can live, commonly no more than a certain number of feet from daycares, schools, and parks. Although a version of this law has been around for 30 years, we know very little about the neighborhoods and towns where RSOs live. This study was performed to determine the characteristics of communities with high rates of RSO residence across ten states.

What the study adds

The authors found an inverse relationship between the rate of RSO residence and zip code median household income. Excluding North Dakota and Oklahoma, RSOs disproportionately resided in very low-income communities and were rarely found in those with median incomes above that of the national (\$57,652 from 2013–2017 ACS). It could not be confirmed whether this was a result of more RSOs emerging from and returning to low-income communities, or whether the financial and social inequalities convicted offenders face forced them to live in certain communities. The other considered variables (racial/ethnic composition, population of children, availability of rental housing units) were determined to have little effect on RSO residence, but the increased presence of RSOs in minority communities was considered by the authors a product of America's racial wealth gap. Also, there was no clear relationship between the severity of RSO restrictions and their residence rates.

Practice or policy implications

The high concentration of RSOs in low-income neighborhoods may make it harder for communities to attract new residents or improve economic conditions. For future research, it is suggested that greater cohesion in state-level policies would improve research on the effectiveness of RSOs in reducing sexual assaults. For instance, some states require RSOs to be 1000 feet from a school, others 2000 feet, and others have no restrictions at all. With this wide range it is difficult to determine conclusively important outcomes like if registries are effective in keeping sex offenders away from children, and prevalence rates of re-offending.

Methods

The study used a cross-sectional, secondary data analysis design and collected information from two sources: online sexual offender registries of the ten states collected in 2018 and 2019, and five-year (2013–2017) census data from the American Community Survey. Its population was RSO's in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma. The authors note that variation among states' sex offender policies and methodological inconsistencies in state registries limited data analysis and inhibited conclusive results in this study.