



Revealing the rapist next door: Property impacts of a sex offender registry



Susan Yeh*

George Mason University School of Law, 3301 N. Fair, Arlington, VA 22201, USA

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ABSTRACT

How do homebuyers respond to perceived crime risks about sex offenders in the neighborhood? I evaluate local property and crime responses to Internet sex offender registry listings. Among more permanent listings, a nearby offender depresses house prices by up to 4 percentage points. I document that the majority of registered sex offenders are transient, with durations of less than 6 months at an address. While a growing literature suggests that housing stability is important in reducing criminal behavior, the market perceives heightened crime risks to be attached to the listings of registered offenders with more stable housing, but not to those who are transient or who have moved away. Prices correspond more strongly to long-term offender locations than to locations of actual sex crimes. I find small, localized reductions in rapes involving weapons within 0.1 mi of offender addresses and increases in sex crimes farther away.

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1. Introduction

How does the public respond to announcements of crime risks, and what are the consequences? Do their perceived risks predict future crimes? Online sex offender registries have generated much debate since their debut in the United States nearly two decades ago. Policy concerns about their crime reducing function have arisen alongside questions about registries' informational value in the community. This paper evaluates local responses to notifications of sex offender locations and investigates property and crime effects of sex offender proximity.

A growing literature discusses the relationship between housing and crime. It is commonly observed that homebuyers worry about crime risk when choosing where to live. Studies have documented a negative relationship between residential house prices and crime incidents (Thaler, 1978; Gibbons, 2004). Crime incidents, however, can be endogenous with neighborhoods. Wealthier residences may attract more property crime (Lynch and Rasmussen, 2001), weaker social connections around some building types may facilitate more street crime (Glaeser and Sacerdote, 2000), and neighborhood quality may affect youth criminal behaviors (Kling et al., 2005).

More recently, researchers have examined responses to localized crime risks as revealed by sex offender registries. Such

community notifications can serve as natural experiments with pre- and post-periods that would allow for causal inference. Studies developed concurrently with this paper have estimated proximity to a sex offender to reduce house prices (Linden and Rockoff, 2008; Pope, 2008). Indeed, these are among a broader literature on the capitalization of amenities, which has shown residential property prices to respond to information about school quality (Black, 1999; Figlio and Lucas, 2004), public spending (Barrow and Rouse, 2004), and environmental hazards (Chay and Greenstone, 2005; Decker et al., 2005; Davis, 2004; Gayer and Viscusi, 2002).

A separate strand of research on criminal behavior studies the impacts of registries on subsequent crime behaviors (Duwe et al., 2008; Agan, 2011; Prescott and Rockoff, 2011). This paper unifies these inquiries and includes attention to transient offenders, a significant population of the registry who are understudied in the empirical literature. Fear driven by online community notifications could motivate other precautionary behaviors beyond housing choices. Analyzing both the property and crime outcomes in local neighborhoods is useful in understanding how people value risks near their homes and provides insights on information provision in the name of public safety.

I investigate the property impacts of being near a publicized high-risk sex offender in three parts. First, I estimate house price responses to perceived crime risks based on the addresses of high-risk sex offenders listed in the Nebraska sex offender registry from 2000 to 2006. To do this, I assemble original data from news media and property records in Lincoln (Lancaster County), Nebraska. I use

* Tel.: +1 703993 8639.

E-mail address: syeh2@gmu.edu

the publication of offenders' home addresses from the registry as an exogenous announcement of a location's change in crime risk. To identify the effects of crime risks as communicated by the registry, I exploit variation in the timing of sex offender listings and the distances from an offender's address to other locations within the same neighborhood. Among the subset of offenders who remain in a location for at least 0.5 years, the announcement of a nearby offender depresses house prices by up to 4 percentage points. This estimate is consistent with existing studies (Linden and Rockoff, 2008; Pope, 2008)¹. As such, my research is also a useful contribution in response to general criticisms that have arisen regarding the lack of replication in social sciences.

Second, I analyze sex offender mobility and crime risks over time. Critics have argued that sex offender notifications stigmatize and make it hard for registrants to re-integrate into society, imposing difficulties when finding employment and housing (Kang, 2012; Levenson and Cotter, 2005a,b). Others hypothesize that this makes them vulnerable to harassment (Bedarf, 1995; Teichman, 2005). Opponents maintain that the registries can instill a false sense of security among the public, with mandatory registration driving transients or unregistered offenders underground.

My evidence is consistent with some of these concerns. I compile data that track each offender's address history and document that the majority of registered offenders are relatively transient. The median duration of addresses listed in the registry was only 0.45 years². In general, sex offenders tend to live into worse neighborhoods with higher poverty levels and lower property values (Larsen et al., 2003). I find that homebuyers do not respond to the majority of offender locations announced in the registry. Over the years in the data, transient addresses are more likely to be observed in richer neighborhoods, while more stable addresses are more likely in poorer neighborhoods. I find that homebuyers perceive heightened crime risks attached to the locations of registered offenders with more stable housing, but not to those who are transient or who have moved away. Among the more permanent addresses, house prices rebound after an offender moves away. Negative effects are not persistent beyond an offender's presence in the neighborhood.

Third, I assess realizations of crime events nearby. Registries may instill a false sense of security, for example, if transient offenders are the recidivists that community notification laws intend to deter. While measuring recidivism is beyond the scope of this study, I look at neighborhood crime incidents more generally. I take advantage of a unique dataset of all individual sex crime incidents with addresses that were reported to the Lincoln Police Department during the study period. The granularity of the data allows me to conduct spatial analyses of whether the addresses of registered high-risk sex offenders predict more sex crime incidents nearby. Previous studies are mixed, finding sex offender registries to decrease sex crimes at the state level (Prescott and Rockoff, 2011) and no effect at the Census block group level (Agan, 2011).

I find that house prices are more strongly influenced by nearby offender addresses than by recent sex crimes. Furthermore, registry notification of high-risk offender addresses predicts a localized (within 0.1 mi) decrease in the risk of rapes involving a weapon

and no increase in the other sex crimes. Notification does predict an increased risk of sex crimes farther away from the offender within the same neighborhood. This increased risk in the broader neighborhood area is roughly consistent with findings in Agan and Prescott (2014). Within one's immediate proximity, however, while house prices suggest fear of or distaste for high-risk sex offenders, sex crime risk is not higher after an offender moves in.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a general background on sex offender registries and community notification laws. Section 3 gives the empirical framework. Section 4 describes the data. Section 5 presents and discusses the results. Section 6 concludes.

2. Background on sex offender registration and community notification laws

The original rationale of sex offender registration and notification laws was to protect the public from recidivists by providing information relevant to children's safety (Office of the Attorney General, 1999). Watchdog and law enforcement groups commonly warn that it is difficult to recognize rapists and child molesters based on appearance or socioeconomic status. A Bureau of Crime Statistics report observed that sex offenders tend to strike close to home, with family, friends, and acquaintances committing the majority of the crimes (Catalano, 2006). Escalating concerns about lurking sex offenders nearby inspired major legislative responses, which first occurred in the 1990s. Named for a child kidnapped near his home, the Jacob Wetterling Act of 1994 became the first federal mandate calling for each state to establish and maintain a registry of addresses and identities of known sex offenders and sexually violent predators, including those released from prison³. In 1996, the Act was amended with Megan's Law, which required states and local law enforcement to notify residents of the sex offenders living in their communities⁴.

Initially, Megan's Law allowed states considerable discretion in their community notification procedures. Interpreting the law liberally, a handful of states and jurisdictions opted early on to publish their registries of offenders on the Internet⁵. In part because they allowed personal information to be easily accessible to the public, the online listings generated lawsuits regarding the violation of offenders' due process, culminating in a 2003 Supreme Court ruling that allowed states to place sex offenders' names, addresses, and photos on public websites⁶. By 2007, all states had established sex offender registries and nearly all published the names with addresses of sex offenders online⁷.

In many senses, online registries are the most accessible type of information on released criminal offenders, given the expansion of Internet access since the 1990s (Madden, 2006). Upon their debuts, the online registries were popular⁸. Informal conversations

³ 42 U.S.C. § 14071.

⁴ Pub. L. No. 104-145, 110 Stat. 1345 (1996).

⁵ Florida in 1996; Alaska, Kansas, and Georgia in 1997; Connecticut, North Carolina, South Carolina in 1998.

⁶ Smith v. Doe, 538 U.S. 84 (2003).

⁷ Vermont and Pennsylvania did not publish offender addresses online until 2009. The types of offenders subject to public notification differed across states and the type of information posted in online registries initially was subject to a state's discretion. Later, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 called for standard criteria. Some states listed individuals with milder convictions such as statutory rape, while others listed only those classified as the most violent and likely to re-offend. States also differed in the length of time one must register and the relevant conviction years.

⁸ For example, the Virginia state police reported 137,000 searches within the first 24 h after the registry went online in December 1998 (Heyser, Holly A. 1998 "Interest in online sex-offender list is high." *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk VA), December 31, B2).). Similarly, the North Carolina website experienced high traffic in its first

¹ Pope (2008) finds no difference in property responses to high-risk or lower-risk sex offenders. While the Nebraska registry publicly listed only high-risk sex offenders during the study period, my results may be generalizable to lower-risk offenders whom the Nebraska registry began to list many years later.

² While brief in duration, the transient addresses arguably are listed long enough for the housing market to notice. They exceed the median time on the market for existing residential homes sold (34 days) in Lincoln.

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