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Where do sex crimes occur? How an examination of sex offense location can inform policy and prevention

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Although ample evidence demonstrates that sex crime policies focused on “stranger danger” types of offenses that occur in public places do little, if anything, to reduce sex crime, we have much less data with which to inform primary prevention strategies. Using archival data collected from the files of 1468 sex offenders, this study provides empirical data on offense location and how it varies by victim–offender relationship. Though 4% of cases occurred in areas normally restricted by residence restrictions or child safety zone legislation, only 0.05% of the offenses were perpetrated by a stranger against a minor victim in a restricted location. By providing narrative descriptions of the types of sex crimes that occur in child-dense locations, this study provides a richer and more contextualized notion of the nature of risk in public-restricted locations. Given the infrequent occurrence of sex crimes in child-dense locations, it is argued that tertiary sex crime prevention efforts ought to focus on where sex crimes most frequently occur (i.e., in the home and by known perpetrators) and that resources be shifted to primary prevention.

Keywords: sex crimes; sex crime prevention; victim–offender relationship; offense locations; sex crime policies

Introduction

Almost 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men in the United States report having been raped at some point in their lives, while 1 in every 2 women and 1 in every 5 men report experiencing other forms of unwanted sexual contact (Black et al., 2011). Though protecting society from sexual violence is a public priority, the manner in which resources are currently allocated does not appear to be driven by evidence. Current sex crime prevention efforts focus on statistically improbable types of offenses, such as the assault or abduction of children by strangers, and divert attention from the broad social climate that allows sexual violence to thrive. As a result, current sex crime prevention efforts have been criticized as being little more than “feel good” measures that serve to stigmatize sex offenders but do little to curb the overall incidence of sexual violence (Ewing, 2011; Janus, 2006; Wright, 2009).

The media, by drawing attention to high-profile “stranger danger” types of cases, has perpetuated stereotypes of sex offenders that are misleading at best and detrimental at worst. While sexual assaults by strangers do occur, evidence suggests that such cases are the exception rather than the rule. In fact, it has been shown that sexual assault is far more likely to come at the hands of a family member or acquaintance than a stranger (e.g., Colombino, Mercado, & Jeglic, 2009; Colombino, Mercado, Levenson, & Jeglic, 2011; Duwe, Donnan, & Tewksbury, 2008; Greenfield, 1997; Smallbone & Wortley, 2000;

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Snyder, 2000). For example, Colombino et al. (2009) found that 91% of sex offenders in their New Jersey sample knew the victim (i.e., acquainted or family member) prior to victimization. Similarly, 79% of sex offenders offended against a victim they knew in a Minnesota sample (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2007). Duwe et al. (2008) found that 51% of offenders in their sample of 224 sexual recidivists had established a relationship with the victim through a collateral contact (e.g., someone they met through a friend, acquaintance, or intimate partner) and 14% had a biological relationship with the victim. Despite this, nearly all of the legislative efforts to date have focused on dealing with cases involving strangers.

Imbalance has also resulted from the prioritization of prediction over prevention. Evidence suggests that *unknown* sex offenders – those not on a sex offender registry – are responsible in nearly 96% of sexual offense convictions (Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008). This notwithstanding, the legislative spotlight remains on the incapacitation or management of *known* (i.e., registered) sex offenders, and comparatively little attention is being paid to efforts that might deter offenses from occurring in the first place. Further, despite data suggesting that only a small percentage of sex crimes occur in public places (Colombino et al., 2009, 2011), policy efforts remain focused on keeping offenders away from child-dense community structures, such as parks and playgrounds. Although most offenses occur in the home, little effort has been directed at understanding ways in which public education campaigns or other interventions might help to prevent offenses in these locations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the frequency and nature of sex crimes that occur in locations restricted by geographically based sex crime legislation, allowing for the critical evaluation of our current approaches to sex crime prevention. In this study, the authors review tertiary and primary sexual assault prevention strategies, present data examining victim–offender relationships and offense locations, and provide narrative summaries of actual sex crimes occurring in restricted locations to illustrate the findings. Following a discussion of the results, the authors conclude by discussing implications for policy and prevention.

Tertiary prevention and sexual violence

As noted, considerable research effort has been directed at identifying factors associated with increased rates of recidivism in known sex offenders. While rates of sexual recidivism are much lower than commonly assumed (approximately 13% over a 4- to 5-year follow-up period; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009), researchers have been able to identify factors associated with increased recidivism risk. Aggregating findings from 82 recidivism studies that collectively examined 29,450 sex offenders, Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2004, 2005) found deviant sexual preference (e.g., penile plethysmograph results, sexual preoccupations) and antisocial orientation (e.g., Antisocial Personality Disorder diagnosis, high Psychopathy Checklist-Revised score) to be the most potent predictors of sexual recidivism. These and other factors found to predict sexual recidivism have been used in the construction of measures (e.g., Static-99; Hanson & Thornton, 2000; Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool-Revised [Mn-SOST-R], Epperson, Kaul, Huot, Hesselton, & Alexander, 2000) used by treatment providers and corrections staff to identify those sex offenders who pose the highest risk of recidivism. As noted, however, most new sex crimes are *not* committed by known sex offenders, thus limiting the extent to which these tools can impact the overall sexual violence problem.

Most currently enacted sex crime legislation seeks to deter known sex offenders from committing recidivistic acts of sexual violence. Community notification laws, which alert community members to registered sex offenders living in their neighborhood, operate under the assumption that safety will be enhanced if we know who the dangerous strangers are in our communities. Residence restrictions, which prevent offenders from living near child-dense community structures, such as schools, playgrounds, or parks, are based on the notion that these locations are the sites where sex offenders find their victims (Durling, 2006). Some jurisdictions have also passed “child safety zones” that prohibit registered sex offenders from loitering (rather than residing) within a certain distance of parks, playgrounds, or other child-dense areas (Calkins, Jeglic, Beatey, Zeidman, & Perillo, 2014). Sex offenders placed on GPS monitoring are tracked so that their movement in locations such as these is limited. Among the most misguided of current sex crime laws may be Halloween restrictions, which prohibit registered sex offenders from giving out candy or opening doors on Halloween. Chaffin, Levenson, Letourneau, and Stern (2009), who found no increase in sex crimes against children around Halloween, suggest that these policies seem to have their basis in the urban myth that warned against the danger of strangers giving out poisoned candy. Indeed, these sex crime laws all seem to originate from the “stranger danger” notion of sex offending. Given that most sex crimes are committed by people known to the victim (e.g., Colombino et al., 2009, 2011; Duwe et al., 2008; Greenfield, 1997; Smallbone & Wortley, 2000; Snyder, 2000), it is not surprising that evidence for these laws has been mixed, at best. At worst, evidence suggests that these laws may inadvertently serve to increase risk of recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 1998; Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012; Jeglic, Spada, & Mercado, 2013; Lees & Tewksbury, 2006; Levenson & Cotter, 2005a, 2005b; Levenson & D’Amora, 2007; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Prescott & Rockoff, 2008; Zevitz, 2006, 2000).

Notably, many of these policies use a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to appreciate the heterogeneity of sex offending (Douard & Janus, 2011; Janus, 2006; Mercado, Tallon, & Terry, 2008). As such, those having only adult victims are, for example, likely to be prohibited from living or loitering near to schools or parks. Given the broad brushstrokes application of these laws and their narrow focus on repeat stranger-perpetrated offenses, laws such as residence restrictions or community notification have had little impact upon rates of sex crimes and may, inadvertently, serve to heighten risk of recidivism by undermining offender re-entry and stability.

Primary prevention and sexual violence

Although resources have primarily been directed toward tertiary prevention, which focuses on preventing recidivism after a crime has occurred, there have been some efforts to engage in primary prevention and curb sex offending before it occurs. Early primary prevention efforts, which focus on helping victims to protect themselves, include school-based sexual educational programs that help children to identify sexual abuse and instill skills that will promote disclosure (DeGue et al., 2012; Finkelhor, 2009). First initiated during the 1980s, education-based programs often involve families, children, teachers, and other adults who work with youth (Lyles, Cohen, & Brown, 2009). The primary goals of these programs include helping children to identify potentially dangerous situations in which sexual abuse may occur, providing strategies to avoid abuse, and increasing the likelihood of abuse disclosure (Finkelhor, 2009). For example, the *Child Assault*

Prevention program (CAP), targeted toward elementary school children, uses hypothetical victimization scenarios to foster discussion about how to identify and disclose abuse if it occurs (Finkelhor, 2009). Binder and Mcniel (1987) found that children ages 5–12 who completed the CAP program displayed higher knowledge scores on abuse-related items compared to their scores prior to the workshop. *Talking about Touching*, a more broad education-based program, includes not only didactic segments about inappropriate touch but also teaches children safety skills related to cars, bikes, and fire. Using pre- and post-interviews after presentation of the *Talking about Touching* curriculum, Sylvester (1997) found improvement in safety knowledge and the application of safety skills. Further, Hébert, Lavoie, Piché, and Poitras (2001) found that, after completing the program, children were more apt to discuss abuse and prevention concepts with their parents. Although these programs have not yet been found to directly decrease the likelihood of victimization (Finkelhor, Asdigian, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995), they do appear to influence discussion about threatening situations and likelihood of disclosure.

Education-based school programs have, however, been criticized for putting responsibility on the victim (Wurtele, 2009). Since the early 2000s there has been a shift in sexual violence primary prevention efforts, with programs evolving to focus on perpetration prevention (DeGue et al., 2012; Renk, Liljequist, Steinberg, Bosco, & Phares, 2002). Most of these programs are conducted at the individual level, focusing on identifying individual-level characteristics that may pose risk for perpetration (e.g., alcohol and drug use, antisocial behavior), though risk factors at the relationship, community, and societal level are gaining increased attention. For example, The Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (n.d.), through the support of the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC's) Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) program, has instituted a statewide primary prevention initiative that, using a multilayered public health model approach to understanding sexual violence, aims to change the climate that allows sexual crimes to occur in the first place. DeGue et al. (2012) note that approaches that attempt to modify the characteristics of settings (such as schools or workplaces) that increase risk for perpetration appear promising. College campuses, for example, often implement sexual violence prevention programs that address rape myths and encourage bystanders to intervene before a sexual assault occurs (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004), whereas other programs may seek to improve school climates or modify community policies. DeGue et al. (2012) note, however, that there is a "critical gap" in data on community level strategies, and that initiatives to target sexual violence at the societal level have also gained insufficient attention.

Although promising, there is limited empirical knowledge of the overall effectiveness of programs developed to reduce sexual violence at the primary prevention level. There are major gaps in our knowledge about primary prevention, particularly with regard to community-level and societal-level risk factors for violence (DeGue et al., 2012). So while there is broad agreement that primary prevention strategies can likely do more than tertiary strategies to curb sexual violence, the evidence base around primary prevention strategies for sexual violence is lacking. Sexual violence is, however, a complex phenomenon that involves the interaction of individual, social, cultural, economic, and societal factors (Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, 2012; World Health Organization, 2002). Given the multifaceted nature of the problem, measuring how change that occurs at multiple and interactive levels (i.e., individual, relationship, community, and societal) impact sexual violence can be challenging.

Sexual violence is a serious public health problem that has long-term consequences not just for victims, but also their families, their communities, and even for the offenders

themselves (Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), 2011). In the United States, sexual violence prevention efforts have been almost exclusively tertiary in focus, in the form of a criminal justice system response that aims to stop known offenders from re-offending. Much less focus has been on preventing sexual violence before it occurs. A public health approach that targets the conditions under which sexual violence occurs has the potential to have a much wider impact in reducing the overall incidence of sexual violence.

In order to calibrate the appropriate level of resource allocation between primary and tertiary prevention approaches, critical examination of the assumptions of current sex crime policy is warranted. Current policy seems, at least in part, rooted in the idea that sex offenders target children in child-dense community locations. Indeed, geographically based legislation (such as residence restrictions, child safety zones, and electronic monitoring) have at their core the presumption that these locations are ripe for sexual predation, and that keeping offenders away from these areas is an important tool in the arsenal of sexual violence prevention.

Study aims

The primary aim of the current study is to provide data on sex crimes that occur in child-dense places of the sort that are typically off-limits under residence restriction or other geographically based sex crime legislation. This study will examine offense location with respect to victim relationship (i.e., family, acquaintance, stranger) and victim age (i.e., minor versus adult). Additionally, a brief narrative summary will be provided about the subset of crimes that occurred in parks, schools, bus stops, and churches so as to provide a more contextualized account of the nature of sex crimes that occur in these restricted locations. It is hoped that empirical knowledge of the situational and social nature of the sexual offenses that occur in these place can be used to evaluate current sex crime policy and inform primary prevention programming.

Method

Participants

Data from the files of 1468 adult male having an index sex offense (i.e., the sex offense for which the offender was most recently incarcerated) and who were released from a New Jersey state prison between 1996 and 2007 were reviewed for use in this study. Offenders averaged 32 years at the time of the index offense ($M = 32.25$, $SD = 11.68$) and were African American (40.5%; $n = 593$), White (36.4%; $n = 533$), Latino (21.4%; $n = 313$), or of other/unknown race or ethnicity (1.7%; $n = 26$). Of the 1468 offenders included in this study, over three quarters (77.5%; $n = 1137$) had a child victim in the index offense (i.e., sex offense against a minor, age 17 or younger), while less than a quarter (22.5%; $n = 331$) had an adult victim in the index offense (i.e., sexual assault against a victim age 18 or older).

Procedure

Archival case files were coded by a team of trained research assistants. The data were obtained from information typically included in the file, including police reports, psychiatric and treatment evaluations, criminal history records, sentencing reports, prison

records, and intake and termination reports. Through various sources contained in the case files, detailed information surrounding the index sex offense was obtained, including victim–offender relationship, location of index sex crime, and nature of offense (e.g., child molestation, adult sexual assault). The situational aspects of the index sex offense were coded as occurring in a “public,” “semi-public,” or a “private” location. Public locations were operationally defined to include schools, bus stops, parks, day care centers, playgrounds, or, in other words, places that are “off-limits” under most geographically based sex offense laws. Movie theaters, restaurants, bars, and parking lots were also operationally defined as public locations. Semi-public locations were considered to be areas other than a private home that offer a degree of privacy, such as a motor vehicle, hotel room, or house party (occurring in a location other than the offender’s, victim’s, or an acquaintance’s home). Private locations were defined as the offender’s or victim’s own home, a home shared by the offender and the victim, or a home of a relative or acquaintance of the offender or the victim. Notably, the location examined in this study is where the offender first “met” the victim, which is not necessarily where the sex offense occurred. It should also be noted that we use the term “met” loosely to mean where the offender first came into contact with their victim. Many of the offenses in this sample were perpetrated by family members or other relatives and in most of these cases the offender and the victim did not meet in the usual sense of the term, rather there was a longstanding relationship. In a small number of cases, however, a victim first met a step-family or family member in a public or semi-public cases (e.g., due to their having immigrated from another country or otherwise having been alienated from the family).

Results

The majority of offenders (both adult and minor) in this sample knew their victim prior to the offense. Over half of the sample (51.9%; $n = 762$) were acquainted with their victim (i.e., knew their victim for more than 24 hours prior to the offense; Hanson, 1997) and over a third had a familial relationship with their victim (33.9%; $n = 497$). A minority of offenders (14.2%; $n = 209$) had no prior relationship with the victim (i.e., knew their victim for less than 24 hours) at the time of the offense. The sample as a whole ($N = 1468$) most frequently met their victims in private settings ($n = 975$, 66.5%). Fewer offenders met their victims in public ($n = 344$, 23.5%) or semi-public locations ($n = 147$, 10.0%). Notably, offense location varied by offender type, $\chi^2(2, N = 1466) = 153.921, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses revealed that offenders with minor victims were more likely to have met victims in private locations ($n = 848$, 74.7%), rather than a public ($n = 207$, 18.2%) or semi-public location ($n = 80$, 7.1%); whereas offenders with adult victims were more likely to have met victims in public locations ($n = 137$, 41.4%), rather than private ($n = 127$, 38.4%) or semi-public locations ($n = 67$, 20.2%).

Similarly, offense location varied by offender–victim relationship, $\chi^2(4, N = 1468) = 482.859, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses revealed that offenders who victimized family members were more likely to “meet” their victim in a private location ($n = 486$, 97.8%) rather than a public ($n = 8$, 1.6%) or semi-public ($n = 3$, 0.6%) location. Those who were acquainted with their victim also most commonly encountered their victims in a private ($n = 447$, 58.8%) as compared to public ($n = 197$, 25.9%) or semi-public ($n = 116$, 15.3%) location. In contrast, those who victimized a stranger were most likely to have encountered their victim in a public ($n = 139$, 66.5%) rather than private ($n = 42$, 20.8%) or semi-public ($n = 28$, 13.4%) location.

Four per cent of the offenses in this sample ($n = 59$) occurred in a restricted location, that is, one typically prohibited by residence restriction (RR) or child safety zone (CSZ) laws. Of these 59 offenses, 78% ($n = 46$) involved a minor victim and 22% ($n = 13$) involved an adult victim. A significant association was found between victim–offender relationship and type of location $\chi^2 (2, N = 1468) = 25.184, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses indicated that acquaintance perpetrators were most likely to meet their victims in a restricted location ($n = 40, 67.8\%$) compared to strangers ($n = 16, 27.1\%$) or familial offenders ($n = 3, 5.1\%$).

Further analyses were conducted to examine the situational aspects of the 59 cases (4%) where an offender first encountered their victim in a restricted child-dense location. Due to missing information, only 47 out of the 59 cases could be included for further examination. These 47 cases included schools ($n = 27$), parks ($n = 10$), churches ($n = 7$), and bus stops ($n = 3$). In 70% ($n = 33$) of the cases, offenders were acquainted with victims and in the remaining third ($n = 14, 30\%$) the offender was a stranger to the victim (see Table 1). Of the 14 stranger offenses, half ($n = 7$) included adult victims and half ($n = 7$) included minor victims (see Table 2). Thus, of the 1456 cases for which there is complete data, only 7 offenses (less than half of 1%) were situations in which the offender targeted an unknown minor victim in a location typically restricted under residence restriction or child safety zone legislation. Further, of these seven offenses where an offender targeted a stranger child victim, four offenders had a child victim under the age of 13 (.03% of total cases), but only two of these offenders had been convicted of a prior sex crime.

Table 1. Child-dense locations by victim–offender relationship ($N = 47$).

Location	Victim–offender relationship			
	Acquaintance $n = 33$		Stranger $n = 14$	
	N	%	N	%
School	24	88.9	3	11.1
Park/playground	4	40.0	6	60.0
Church	5	71.4	2	28.6
Bus stop	0	0.0	3	100.0

Note: Due to small sample size, no statistical analyses were conducted.

Table 2. Child-dense locations by offender type ($N = 47$).

Location	Offender type			
	Child victim offender $n = 33$		Adult victim offender $n = 14$	
	N	%	N	%
School	20	74.1	7	25.9
Park/playground	7	70.0	3	30.0
Church	6	85.7	1	14.3
Bus stop	0	0.0	3	100.0

Note: Due to small sample size, no statistical analyses were conducted.

To provide a more contextualized account of the offenses in the 47 cases occurring in a restricted location, event details were examined. In the 27 cases where offenders first encountered their victim at a school, 24 (88.9%) were acquainted with the victim. For example, one offense included an offender who worked as a substitute teacher at the school where he met his teenage victim, a high school student, in his class. The victim and offender both alleged their sexual relationship was consensual. Another case involved an offender who attempted to sexually assault a female classmate at a school they both attended. A similar offense involved a high-school-aged offender who knew his middle-school-aged victim from the school they both attended and who coerced her to perform oral sex on him in a friend's home. In the remaining three (11.1%) cases that occurred in a school, the offender was unknown to the victim. In one case, a man fondled a 14-year-old female on the sidewalk outside of her school. In another case, an offender fondled two female teenagers on the grounds of their high school.

In offenses where the offender met the victim in a park, the offender tended to be a stranger to the victim (60.0%; $n = 6$), rather than an acquaintance (40.0%; $n = 4$). In each of the four cases where the offender was an acquaintance, the victim knew the offender from the park. For example, one offense involved a 16-year-old offender who fondled a juvenile female acquaintance while in the park. In another case, an offender in his twenties asked his two minor female acquaintances to come back to his home, where he then raped them. Cases involving strangers perpetrating offenses in a park tended to include more violence. For example, one offender met his 30-something female victim in the park, threatened her with a knife, and then took her to a nearby abandoned building where he raped her. Another case involved an offender with multiple prior offenses who fondled an 11-year-old boy in the park.

Of the seven cases where the offender first met his victim in a church, five (71.4%) were already acquainted with the victim and two (28.6%) were stranger offenses. In one case, a 20-something-year-old offender, who was employed by the church to help with childcare, fondled and forced oral sex upon some of the children under his care. In a similar case, a priest sexually assaulted minor victims he met through the church. Another offender, who was acquainted with his adolescent female victim through his church, took her to his car where he fondled and vaginally penetrated her. An example of a stranger offense involved an offender who was a bus driver for the church. He picked up his teenage male victim from the church and fondled him on the bus.

In each of the three offenses where an offender met his victim at a bus stop, the offenses were perpetrated against adults by strangers. For example, in one case an offender, while driving his car, saw a female in her twenties at a bus stop. He offered her a ride, and then once inside the car, kissed and fondled the victim. In a separate case, an offender met his adult female victim at a bus stop on the street. He then took her to a vacant lot where he sexually assaulted her. Similarly, an intoxicated offender encountered his 20-something-year-old female victim at a bus stop on the street. He threatened the victim with a gun and vaginally raped her.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to provide a more highly contextualized understanding of sex crimes that occur in areas typically restricted by sex crime legislation, such as schools, parks, churches, and bus stops. It is the hope of this study that such data will help not only in the critical evaluation of current sex crime policy, but also contribute to evaluation and decisions about the prioritization of tertiary and primary prevention initiatives. Offenders in this sample

met their victims in a restricted location less than 4% (59 out of 1468 case) of the time. Of the 59 offenses that occurred in these locations, 13 (22%) were perpetrated against adults and 46 (78%) were perpetrated against children, which is consistent with perpetration patterns found in the overall sample (78% of overall sample had a child victim and 22–23% of overall sample had an adult victim). This suggests that offenses that occur in restricted public locations do not disproportionately include child victims. Notably, the majority of the offenses that initiated in these locations were perpetrated by someone related to or already acquainted with the victim (72.9%), with just over a quarter (27.1%) of these cases involving a stranger. Only 0.5% (7/1456) of the offenses that took place in a restricted location were perpetrated by a stranger who did not know his minor victim. Further, of these seven offenses where a stranger targeted a minor victim, four of the offense involved a child victim under the age of 13 (0.3%) while the remaining three involved an adolescent victim aged 13 or older (0.2%). Notably, only two of those seven cases involved an offender with a prior conviction for a sex crime, which reflects the reality that most new sex crimes are not committed by known sex offenders (Sandler et al., 2008). The narrative examples highlight the heterogeneity of these cases. Even in those cases where a stranger perpetrated an offense in a restricted location, offense details show considerable variability in terms of victim age, level of violence, and modus operandi.

As shown by these data, sex crime legislation such as residence restrictions tend toward the exceptional (i.e., statistically rare) cases rather than the typical ways in which victims are sexually assaulted. With the benefit of a large sample size, we were able to identify an ample number of sex crimes that occurred in restricted public locations, though very few of these fit the prototype of the stranger predator who targets minor children in restricted locations. As such, policy measures that target offenses perpetrated by strangers in child-dense locations are likely to have very little impact in reducing the overall sexual violence problem.

These findings suggest the importance of changing the message of sexual violence prevention away from “stranger danger” and instead focusing on the places and situations in which sexual violence more typically occurs. The majority of sexual offenses are perpetrated by family members or acquaintances and, as these data show, even offenses occurring in child-dense public locations are most commonly perpetrated by people already acquainted with the victim. Data from this study shed light on the importance of a prevention model that focuses efforts on places where offenders regularly come into contact with or have access to victims, namely, the home. As Janus (2007) notes, a change in our approach to sexual violence prevention is necessary; rather than a narrow focus on preventing atypical crimes that occur in public places between strangers, this change should involve a more empirically based approach that aims to prevent the most common sorts of offenses.

While the structure and process of sex offender treatment, assessment, and legislation vary from state to state, the trend in the United States has been for enhanced confinement, supervision, and monitoring of this population (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007).

Indeed, the United States has implemented the most restrictive policies and there appear to be increasing attempts to replicate parts of it overseas. While still unsuccessful, there have been multiple attempts to enact an international version of Meagan’s law (Guzder, 2009), as well as attempts by the European Union to create a centralized registry (Newburn, 2011). Evidence from this study suggests that the international community should exercise caution in following the model of sex offender policy in the United States as these data further demonstrate that stranger danger approaches fail to reduce rates of sexual violence in a meaningful way (see, e.g., Zgoba, Witt, Dalessandro, & Veysey, 2008).

There are a number of limitations to the current study. First, the broad operationalization of “acquaintances” includes anyone who is not a family member or a stranger. This

does not distinguish between an unmarried significant other or close friends and nameless neighbors. Some of these acquaintances will be far closer to being a family member while others could be considered strangers. Second, the study did not have data about which offenders were on a sex offender registry. Some of the offenders in this sample could have been subject to legislation that led them avoid restricted areas, artificially lowering the contact rates in these areas. Another limitation is that the sample only consists of convicted sex offenders. Because sexual offenses committed by strangers tend to be reported more than familial assaults, the results may be skewed toward the overrepresentation of stranger offenses. On the flipside, stranger offenses may make identification more difficult, which could skew toward the underrepresentation of stranger offenders in this data set. Finally, the study does not examine the physical or psychological harm inflicted upon the victim. Thus it is a study of prevalence and likelihood, and cannot address issues relating to severity and impact. After all, not all sexual assaults are the same. This study does, however, provide an examination of the nature of sex crimes that occur in locations typically restricted under residence restriction or other geographically based sex crime legislation, and therefore can inform policy development and our approach to the management of sex offenders.

There are many questions that remain to be answered by further research. For example, the association between contact/offense location and risk of injury/death merits attention. There is evidence to suggest that stranger sexual offenses are associated with greater levels of violence and physical force than nonstranger offenses (Stermac, Du Mont, & Kalemba, 1995; Woods & Porter, 2008), and this would imply that victims in stranger offenses are at greater risk of injury or death. Since our data show that strangers often meet their victims in public areas, stranger offenses may mediate an association between encounters in restricted areas and heightened risk of injury or death. Also, it will be critical for research to keep pace with new means of coming into contact with potential victims (e.g., social networking, email, texting). Indeed, because research suggests that relational proximity is more important than geographic proximity (Duwe et al., 2008), research that examines the social contours of digital encounters with victims is especially timely.

Because many sex offenders form a relationship with their victims, further research about how individuals become acquainted with their victims prior to offense is important. Additionally, given the importance of the situational context in offending (Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008), attention should be given to how to reduce opportunities for offending in distinct (e.g., residential or public) settings. This sort of data would allow for the design of public education campaigns, offender interventions, or policy measures likely to have a more broad, population-level impact in preventing sexual violence.

Primary prevention strategies and funding should be prioritized. As noted, most new sex crimes are not perpetrated by individuals on a sex offender registry; as such, downstream approaches that focus on registered sex offenders will at best prevent a very small portion of the overall problem of sexual violence. Moreover, tertiary prevention strategies do not reduce the number of perpetrators or tackle the social mores that allow sexual violence to happen in the first place (DeGue et al., 2012). Primary prevention policies can have a broader impact to the extent that they aim to reduce rates of sexual violence at the population level rather than more narrowly focusing on preventing perpetrators from re-offending. A focus on preventing sex crimes before they occur more appropriately channels our efforts away from an expressive approach that seeks to stigmatize offenders to a preventive focus that aims to stop crimes before they occur. A shift toward primary prevention will reduce the many psychological and long-term consequences that victims

often endure many years after abuse (Widom, 1989, 1996, 1999; Widom & Ames, 1994; Widom, Weiler, & Cottler, 1999).

Primary prevention strategies that show promise include bystander intervention programs that seek to involve community members in deterring or reporting sexual violence, and these strategies are consistent with a move to address the multiple layers of the social ecology in which sexual violence occurs (DeGue et al., 2012). Societal values that permit violation of sexual boundaries and coercive behavior deserve attention. As well, rigorous evaluation of the systemic issues under which sexual violence flourishes, such as poverty, lack of education, economic insecurity, and poor health care, should be undertaken. Indeed, understanding sexual violence as a public health problem requires a paradigmatic shift, one that views sexual violence as a product of the broad social climate in which we live, and not simply as something perpetrated by strangers who lurk around school grounds or other child-dense areas.

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