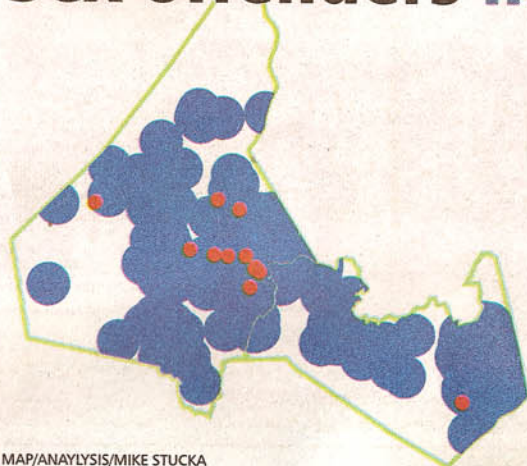


# Sex offenders mapped out of the city

## The Call's map may alter city ordinance

By REBECCA HYMAN  
Call Senior Staff Writer

By MIKE STUCKA  
Special to The Call



MAP/ANALYSIS/MIKE STUCKA

This map demonstrates that 2,500-foot buffer zones around schools, parks and daycare centers would cover most of the city. Registered Level III sex offenders live in the red dot areas. The blue areas are city locales in which they would be banned from living under the proposed ordinance.

TAUNTON – According to a map created by the *The Call*, the sex offender ordinance before the City Council would effectively banish Level III sex offenders from most of the city.

The prohibited area would include at least 82 percent of the city's population and 63 percent of its land area, which includes swamps and other unbuildable land.

City Solicitor Steven Torres, one of the driving forces behind the ordinance, said in light of the map produced by *The Call*, the proposed 2,500-foot radius buffer zone around schools, parks and daycare centers may well need to be shrunk to 1,000 feet for the ordinance to withstand court challenges.

"Based on the information you've provided, if it's borne out, that may be a reason to shrink it to 1,000 feet as I'd first suggested," Torres said.

Ordinance sponsor City Councilor Thomas C. Hoye Jr. agreed.

See MAP, Page A5

## How the map was made

By MIKE STUCKA  
Special to The Call

TAUNTON – *The Call's* map and analysis used geographical information system software called ArcGIS.

Lists of licensed childcare providers and registered Class III sex offenders came from state agencies.

Maps of the city itself, schools within the city and some of its parks came from a state mapping agency.

Additional parks were plotted from a list provided by the city.

The computer helped match addresses – such as 71 Cohannet St., the location of some YMCA childcare programs – to locations on the map.

In all, *The Call* reviewed some 69 childcare providers; 21 schools; 20 parks; and 26 sex offenders.

Because the city council has not approved a list of prohibited places, a reporter had to guess what would be appropriate.

Some of the data was left out, such as a sex offender that lived in Middleboro but worked here, and one school, called the Tri-County District at 60 Hodges Ave., which may have been replaced by a housing project years ago.

A reporter guessed that the city's golf course might be listed as a prohibited park, but not the land surrounding a reservoir. Two of the city's smallest playgrounds could not be plotted accurately.

Population was estimated in two ways, both using Census 2000 "block-level" data. Both methods estimated that 82 percent of the population would be affected under 2,500-foot buffers. The methods diverged more on the 1,000-foot buffers, showing some 41.8 percent and 45.5 percent of the population.

*The Call's* map likely understates the restrictions on sex offenders.

City councilors are considering additional restrictions on places "where children regularly congregate," none of which have been identified and could not be placed on these maps.

Additionally, the city would restrict sex offenders from the edge of properties. Many of the places on *The Call's* maps are computerized pins on a map, not a blob marking the property lines of school grounds or a park. This means the actual residency restrictions would stretch farther than what *The Call's* map shows.

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# Can the city ban offenders?

## Experts question restrictions' Constitutionality, effectiveness

By REBECCA HYMAN  
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Special to The Call

TAUNTON — Some experts question the wisdom and Constitutionality of residency restrictions on sex offenders.

Northeastern University Professor Jack Levin dubbed the restrictions cropping up across the country — including a proposal in Taunton — a dangerous “fad.”

“The saddest thing is that the approach is almost completely ineffective, and, in some cases, makes matters worse. It may finally push them back into a life of crime,” said Levin, the director of the Brudnick Center on Violence at Northeastern.

Levin, who has recently appeared on the *O'Reilly Factor* to discuss sex offenders, said the goal of parole is to integrate offenders back into society.

But residency restrictions and a public registry for sex offenders have the opposite effect of ostracizing offenders.

By stigmatizing them and making it hard for them to find a place to live or hold a job, such measures increase the likelihood they will re-offend, Levin said.

Levin said he is anything but soft

See CONSTITUTIONAL, Page A2

### ■ CONSTITUTIONAL, from Page A1

on crime. He supports a “two-strikes-and-you’re-never-out-again” policy. That would mean repeat sex offenders would be sentenced to life in prison.

But residency requirements are the worst of both worlds, Levin said. The offenders are free to attack and may feel more desperate.

One of the glaring problems with residency requirements is that “children are everywhere,” as Levin put it, not just in schools, playgrounds and daycare centers.

“They live in homes and apartments. It’s virtually impossible to impose an effective buffer zone,” he said.

But City Councilor Thomas C. Hoye Jr., the sponsor of the Taunton proposal, said he doesn’t buy Levin’s argument.

Hoye said the ordinance would only apply to Level III sex offenders, who have already been deemed a high risk to re-offend.

He’s not worried about driving them toward a life of crime. They’ve already made that choice, he said.

Hoye said the only solution is to deprive them of access to children. The ordinance isn’t perfect, but it’s better than nothing and the only tool at the council’s disposal, he said.

Taunton Police Capt. Robert Smith, who maintains the sex offender registry for the Taunton police department, said he does not support the ordinance in its current draft.

“The law we’ve got now is working, even though it’s not perfect. Is the cure going to be worse than the disease?” Smith asked.

Smith said the 27 registered Level III sex offenders in Taunton are cooperative. They notify him of changes in residency and work. And he’s never had one of them re-offend, at least not one who’s gotten caught.

“Are we fixing the problem or moving it or making it bigger?” Smith asked.

Smith called it “feel-good legislation” that won’t prevent crime and will be hard to enforce.

Sex offenders will still be able to

“Children are everywhere. They live in homes and apartments. It’s virtually impossible to impose an effective buffer zone.”

— Northeastern University Professor Jack Levin

get access to children if they’re determined. They’ll still be able to ride the bus to the mall or find other ways to reach kids, he said.

Besides, he said, most sex offenders know their victims. That’s true of many of Taunton’s 27 registered Level III sex offenders, he said.

“These are the ones we know about, the 27. We don’t know what’s going on with some uncle who’s had a few beers and attacks a 14-year-old nephew or niece,” Smith said.

Dr. Elizabeth Englander said many people have the impression the major danger is pedophile’s who prey on strangers. But that’s a myth.

Statistically, children are much more likely to be attacked by someone they know, said Englander, a professor of psychology at Bridgewater State College.

But, she added, “You could argue that even if it’s a small risk, it makes sense to mitigate it.”

However, Levin is not the only expert who suspects restrictions on sex offenders could even increase, rather than decrease, the number of molestations.

Jill S. Levenson, of Florida’s Lynn University, wrote, “There is no evidence that sex offender residence restrictions prevent sex crimes or increase public safety.”

More problems could come if they’re cut off from support networks, such as their families, she cautioned in a paper last year: “Sex offenders rouse little public sympathy, but exiling them may ultimately increase their danger.”

By one count, at least 18 states now have some form of residency restrictions for sex offenders.

More communities are considering

regulating where sex offenders may live, said Charles Onley, a research associate with the Department of Justice-supported Center for Sex Offender Management.

Onley said much of the public already believes some restrictions exist, such as prohibitions against living across the street from a school. People think such restrictions make logical sense.

“I don’t know that you could prove your community is more safe,” he said. “Looking at it rationally, it appears that it is.”

However, as residency restrictions increase, so does the number of sex offenders who go “underground.”

In just one year, the number of missing Iowa sex offenders tripled, *The New York Times* reported. Onley said Oklahoma officials reported similar problems after they added residency restrictions.

“They can’t find [offenders], and that basically negates the reason they had” for passing the law.

Legal challenges are also increasing. The U.S. Supreme Court turned down its opportunity to review the Iowa law, letting restrictions remain.

Attention is now focused on Georgia, where a legal challenge was scheduled to be heard July 11. The state prohibits sex offenders from living within 1,000 feet of school bus stops, which are common in residential areas. In suburban Gwinnett County, all 292 sex offenders live in prohibited housing; in DeKalb County, adjacent to Atlanta, all 490 sex offenders would have to move. In the mid-state Bibb County, all but three of the 30 sex offenders would have to move.

In Taunton, sex offenders already living in permanent housing would be grandfathered under the proposed ordinance. So, the cluster living in boarding houses on Broadway — near St. Mary’s Primary School — might be able to remain.

City Councilor Thomas C. Hoye Jr., the sponsor of the Taunton proposal, says the ordinance isn’t perfect, but it’s better than nothing, and the only tool at the council’s disposal.