

Sex-offender registries in five states inflate counts by 43 percent

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Do an online search for sex offenders living in your neighborhood and you may be alarmed by how many you find. But a new study of sex-offender registries in five states shows that they overestimate the number of offenders actually living in the community by as much as 60 percent.

"Websites that list sex offenders may make it seem that there are a lot of them living among us. It makes it hard for the public to discern risk," said Alissa Ackerman, assistant professor of [social work](#) at the University of Washington Tacoma. Improving the accuracy of sex-offender registries also means "better use of law-enforcement resources to watch the people who actually need to be watched," she said.

Ackerman is lead author of a study examining sex offender counts compiled by Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New York and Texas – states with large sex-offender registries. She obtained the counts from last year's state records, which are available to the public.

Ackerman discovered that the registries include people who are not actually living within the community, such as individuals who have died, been deported, are in jail or have moved out of state. Across the five states in the study, she found that only 43 percent, or 114,690 out of 201,135 sex offenders listed, were actually living in the communities designated by the registries.

By state, Ackerman found:

- Florida had the greatest discrepancy, reporting 56,784 sex offenders when only 22,877 – a 60 percent difference – were living in Florida communities.
- New York, at 52 percent, had the second-highest discrepancy, listing 32,930 offenders in the registry with just 15,950 living in the community.
- Illinois had a 48 percent difference, with 25,088 registered offenders and 13,066 actually residing in the community.
- Georgia had a 36 percent difference, 20,212 listed on the registry and 7,201 living in the community.
- At 25 percent, Texas had the lowest discrepancy, with 49,786 actual residents from the 66,121 sex offenders listed.

The study will be published in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Crime and Justice*.

States differ in data collection and reporting procedures, and that can lead to inflated numbers and make it difficult for the public to distinguish the level of risk, Ackerman said. For instance, states vary in whether they include all levels of [sex offenders](#). New York lists only levels 2 and 3, the offenders most likely to commit sexual crimes again. Florida, on the other hand, lists all offenders regardless of risk level.

"Registries are helpful if they are properly and accurately maintained and include only those individuals living in the community," Ackerman said. "Then we are able to discern risk in our communities and the public can be better aware of offenders living near them."

She added that more than 90 percent of victims know their offender, and listed family members, stepparents, close friends and acquaintances as common perpetrators. "We look at strangers on the sex offender registry websites, but it's really the people who we know who we need to worry about."

Provided by University of Washington

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