

The Grimm Truth

Disparate thoughts and random opinions of longtime Miami Herald columnist Fred Grimm

The Miami Herald  BLOG

Start Calculating the Sex Offender Bans And Housing Alternatives Shrink From Thousands To A Piddling 43

Paul Zandbergen, the University of New Mexico geographer, hired along with Timothy Hart, director of the Center for the Analysis of Crime Statistics at the University of Nevada, to study the impact of the sex offender residency restriction in Miami-Dade County's, compiled a similar study in Orlando in 2006. I e-mailed him a few questions about that study and his findings in Miami-Dade.

I was wondering what aspects of your study, if any, you found most surprising.

Zandbergen: The fact that very little housing remains outside the current residency restriction zones currently in effect did not come as a surprise. What was somewhat surprising is how little housing remains even when public school bus stops are not included. Public school bus stop in general are the most restrictive category due to their large number and distribution in residential areas, but the local ordinances in Miami-Dade County with a typical distance of 2,500 feet are so restrictive that most housing is off-limits even without considering public school bus stops.

The other aspect that was perhaps not very surprising but revealing was the disproportionate effect the residency restrictions have on affordable housing relative to more expensive housing. Most affordable housing is located in medium to high density urban areas with a high probability of being in close proximity to a school, daycare and/or park. In relative terms, therefore, lower cost housing categories are much more impacted by residency restrictions.

How did the findings here differ from the situation in Orlando?

Zandbergen: The Orange County study in 2005 did not examine any local ordinances since none were in effect at the time. We did look at both 1,000 and 2,500 feet distances but applied these across the entire county without looking at municipal boundaries. As a result we did not examine differences between incorporated and unincorporated areas. The Orange County study also employed a count of occupied residential parcels and did not examine housing affordability or actual availability. In general the findings were not very different (a 2,500 feet buffer severely limits housing options) but the present Miami-Dade study is much more in depth by looking at affordability of housing and the rental units actually available on the market.

Did you find that public officials or opinion makers in Orlando were selective about your findings in that study? (Were findings taken out of context or misused to support one particular contention or another?)

Zandbergen: While the Orange County study has been widely cited by other researchers and policy makers, I do not know the extent to which local public officials have employed it. I have noticed, however, that the Orange County study has been referenced in many other jurisdictions – perhaps not incorrectly but without recognizing local conditions. The impacts of residency restrictions on housing availability will vary greatly with the restriction categories being included and the distance values being applied, as well as with variations in density and distribution of urban development. This limits the ability to generalize across jurisdictions and suggests a careful analysis of local conditions is required to make informed decisions – and the present study of Miami-Dade County does exactly that.

I was wondering how big a gap you suppose there might be between the raw numbers of affordable housing outside the restrictive zones in Miami-Dade County and the practical realities of placing transient sex offenders.

Zandbergen: The analysis shows that there are 6,832 theoretically available rental units in Miami-Dade County with an estimated monthly rent of \$1,250 or less that fall outside the residency restriction zones currently in effect. In July 2009 only 43 of these units were listed as available on publicly available rental listings. Field work in two neighborhoods found no additional available rental units outside the restriction zones that were not already on these rental listings, suggesting that the actual availability of rental units is indeed very limited. In addition, many landlords may be hesitant to accept convicted felons as tenants, and possibly even more so when it comes to sex offenders.

This makes it very difficult for probation officers to finding suitable housing for sex offenders. In general, placement of sex offenders by probation officers in Miami-Dade County is severely limited by:

- The challenge of determining on an ongoing basis which specific properties are actually available and fall outside the restriction zones. From an operational perspective this requires substantial resources, including the support of mapping professionals on an ongoing basis.
- The very low number of affordable rental units that are actually available.
- The potential hesitation of landlords to accept sex offenders as tenants.
- The relatively remote locations of many of the small number of actually available units, which limits access

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