

## Numbers tell a sad tale for exiled offenders

By FRED GRIMM

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Begin with a baseline of 927,647 -- the total number of housing units in Miami-Dade County -- and the rationale for stashing several dozen sex offenders under the Julia Tuttle Causeway suffers from an apparent crush of alternatives.

Surely 927,647 housing possibilities leave the Florida Department of Corrections no excuse for dumping newly released probationers into a homeless colony.

But that's only the starting number. Paul Zandbergen, a geographer with the University of New Mexico, and Timothy Hart, director of the Center for the Analysis of Crime Statistics at the University of Nevada, juxtaposed their baseline against the reality of ex-cons looking for housing in daunting circumstances.

Figure the number of "affordable" rental units (available for \$1,250 or less a month) and the offenders' alternatives shrink to 270,874, Zandbergen reported in a declaration filed in Miami-Dade circuit court. (The ACLU hired Zandbergen and Hart, both former University of South Florida professors, to provide a statistical backdrop for a lawsuit challenging the county's residency restrictions.)

When the researchers subtracted rentals located in zones where state, county and 24 different municipalities ban registered sex offenders, the possibilities tumble again. "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," Zandbergen told me via e-mail Wednesday.

### THE OBSTACLES

But relatively few of those are actually on the market. "In July 2009 only 43 of these units were listed as available on publicly available rental listings," he said. None of those 43 rented for as little as \$750 a month.

"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 find suitable housing for sex offenders," the professor said.

Most of those few available units -- 30 -- were located in unincorporated Miami-Dade County, with a less restrictive ordinance than most of Miami-Dade cities. I'm not sure how that finding helps the ACLU's difficult legal case -- which claims the county, which put a 2,500-foot buffer around schools, exceeded its authority by preempting the less restrictive state law, which calls for a 1,000-foot radius around schools, parks, playgrounds, etc.

### UNSPOKEN JUDGMENT

But the study offers powerful evidence for a theoretical case -- the lawsuit not filed -- against Miami and Miami Beach and other municipalities that amassed so many 5,000-foot circles around schools, parks, daycare centers, even school bus stops (18,000 of them countywide) that the effect was the virtual banishment of sex offenders. Judges tend to frown on local ordinances that utterly exclude sex offenders from anywhere within the city limits.

Of course, the Miami-Dade Commission can fix this, without frittering away money fighting lawsuits, by passing a county-wide ordinance mandating less Draconian limits. Zandbergen and Hart's study offers a series of scenarios that show housing alternatives increasing as zones are ratcheted back.

The researchers calculated the housing numbers. But they failed to offer estimates on how much political courage the county commission needs to send the Tuttle dwellers home.

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