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Sex offenders clustering in poor neighborhoods

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Each weekday morning, Maria Sosa's 8-year-old daughter walks her 6-year-old brother from their home on Everton to Anson Jones Elementary on Canal.

Past rows of little wood houses on blocks and sagging two-story boarding houses. Past all the taquerias and cantinas.

Past the tiny building where six registered child sex offenders rent rooms from another registered child sex offender.

The house at 3514 Canal is an extreme example of a trend that's beginning to concern many cities: clusters of sex offenders that infect low-income neighborhoods.

The Canal rooming house is just one of 16 sex offender residences clustered in an area of about a square mile just east of downtown and south of Buffalo Bayou.

The area takes in one other multiple-offender address, a small apartment building in the 400 block of Hutcheson where three registered sex offenders live.

That's a total of 24 registered sex offenders in the area. All but two were convicted of offenses involving children.

Of the two dozen sex offenders in the area studied, 12 are on probation and four on parole. The remaining eight have discharged their sentences, meaning they are not under supervision.

The problem is growing in other cities as well.

The Arizona Legislature has formed the House Ad Hoc Sex Offender Clustering Committee to deal with the problem there.

A National Institute of Justice study found that in Wisconsin, half the citizens attending meetings designed to notify them of sex offenders in their neighborhoods left feeling more concerned than before they were notified.

In Oregon, residents of Oregon City and LaPine began checking sex offender registries after the disappearance of two young girls early last year and were stunned to discover large clusters of sex offenders in both communities.

In St. Petersburg, Fla., civic associations are banding together to fight sex offender clusters at cheap motels revealed in a St. Petersburg Times article last year.

The 1,584-square-foot Canal building, still listed in appraisal district records as an auto shop, has been converted into rooms housing a total of seven registered sex offenders -- all of whom committed

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offenses involving children.

"It's an ad hoc prison in a residential neighborhood," said Andy Kahan, director of the Houston Victims Assistance Center.

Many in the mixed commercial-industrial-residential area just east of downtown are unaware of who their neighbors are.

The Canal rooming house is anonymous, despite the fact that at least three residents were ordered to display signs warning children away as a condition of their probation.

Because the actual residence of each of the men is the room he occupies inside the house, those with sign requirements were allowed to post the signs on the doors to their rooms.

"It's not an absolutely ideal situation," said Mike Enax, director of Harris County Adult Probation. "But technically they are not in violation."

"Technical compliance doesn't mean they're complying with the spirit" of their probation conditions, said state District Judge Ted Poe, who set the probation conditions for one of the Canal residents.

"The sign is to let folks know who's there. So no, I don't like the idea that it's on the inside door," Poe said. He said the conditions of probation for residents of the Canal house could be amended to require that the signs go outside where people can see them before they enter the dwelling.

With seven sex offenders living in such a small space, Kahan said, "They ought to have a giant billboard outside the house."

Probation and parole rules prevent registered child sex offenders from living near places where children gather: schools, daycares, parks, playgrounds, youth centers, public pools, video arcades.

"It's so limited, so strict," Enax said, "and there are so many parks and schools."

Added to those restrictions is the social stigma attached to sex offenses, said Kim Valentine, probation department assistant director.

"They're socially isolated in many ways before they committed their offenses," Valentine said, "and later because of the registry. They're not welcome in many places."

Valentine said even if sex offenders can find an apartment complex that allows them, living in a complex "means they're potentially going to violate the child safety zone."

None of the seven sex offenders who live at the Canal house could be reached for comment. One child sex offender who lives in the same area spoke with the Chronicle on condition his name not be used.

"You have no idea how tough it is after you're convicted of a sex offense," said the 34-year-old, who was convicted of possession of child pornography. "I got probation, but having my name on that list is like a life sentence."

The parolee said it isn't surprising child sex offenders end up in clusters: "You hear about places at therapy, at group, from other guys, because they're all having the same problems."

Although studies proliferate on recidivism among sex offenders and how it is affected by treatment, notification laws and other factors, no research could be found on whether living in proximity to other sex offenders affected them negatively, or at all.

"It bodes no good," said Sharon Burns, a registered sex offender treatment provider and licensed counselor with Burns & Crismon Institute for Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Paraphilias.

"It flies in the face of everything I teach," Burns said. "What I teach ... is independence.

"If you wanted to be drug-free, would you go live in a house where six or seven other drug users lived?" Burns asked. "They need to make some other kinds of friends."

"My first impression was that I didn't like the fact they were all together" in the small house, Poe agreed.

The judge said his initial concern was tempered somewhat when he considered that, since five of the residents are on probation and only two share the same probation officer, "There's probation officers coming and going all the time.

"But I'm not so sure I like the idea for future cases," Poe added.

After discovering how many child sex offenders were in her neighborhood, Sosa said she may start walking her children to school again.

"I did for a while after that man took that little boy," Sosa said, referring to Lawrence Napper, who was on parole for rape when he kidnapped a 6-year-old boy from the street at Live Oak and Calumet, and sexually assaulted the child.

Napper lived in the 6000 block of Schroeder, about a mile from Sosa's house. Records show there are three registered sex offenders living in that block today.