

## Risk Factors of Sexual Assault

**Summary of Key Factors:** Proximity to Bars/Clubs, Schools/Colleges, Parks, Offender's Residence; Distribution of Age, Gender, Wealth, Crime; Time of day, Day of week

**Aim:** To assist analysts with the identification of risk factors for the production of risk terrain maps. Specifically, this brief provides an annotated review of the factors related to sexual assault and the settings and times for which some factors may be most relevant. This information should be especially useful to help choose a time period for creating risk terrain maps (i.e., Step<sup>i</sup> 3), to identify aggravating and mitigating risk factors to include in your risk terrain model (i.e., Steps 5 and 6), and to inform the operationalization of your risk factors to risk map layers (i.e., Step 7).

**By:** Danielle M. Rusnak

### Operational Definition

Sexual assault is "the penetration, no matter how slight, in which physical force or coercion is used or in which the victim is physically or mentally incapacitated".<sup>ii</sup> Based on this definition of sexual assault both cases of rape (forcible, date, stranger and acquaintance<sup>iii</sup>) and child molestation (male vs. female victim; pedophile vs. hebephile)<sup>iv</sup> will be considered in this brief's operational definition. It is important to acknowledge not only the definition used for sexual assault, but that within sexual assault the offender-victim relationship may play a role in the incident.<sup>v</sup>

Sexual assault may involve a variety of serious and minor criminal behaviors. Among these behaviors, the use of force might or might not be the case, coercion and substance use may also be involved. The sole focus on the behavior and personality of an offender in current research produces a dilemma in that when used alone and without spatial or temporal considerations they are insufficient for meaningful prevention activities.

It is important to note that in the spatial analysis of crime, a clear distinction between offenses is imperative as every crime is built on different situational factors and behaviors relative to each event. This is especially important when disaggregating the category of sexual assault to rapists and child molesters, for instance, since definitions become more complicated and risk factors may vary.

### Setting Effects

Offenders, targets and crimes can vary amongst setting. For example, sexual assaults in a rural setting may not necessarily have public transport as a major correlate of risk since that form of transport is used less frequently than in urban settings. Regarding offender-victim relationships, the parties may be strangers, acquaintances or family, each of which may dictate a different location desirable for a sexual assault; such as outside or in the confines of a building, and dependent upon the victim and/or offender of interest. Keep in mind is that sexual assault may vary by setting since each subtype of sexual assault (rape: forcible, date, stranger and acquaintance; and child molestation: male vs. female victim; pedophile vs. hebephile) may have different correlates associated with it.

### Temporal Differences

Different times of day, week or even year (e.g., season) may have different effects on how both offenders and victims behave. Individuals at a bar/club at night are generally intoxicated and may be alone with a diminished concern for personal safety. Night times will provide more suitable targets for sexual assaults that occur in outside settings; a group of potential targets walking home from school during daylight hours is less at risk of sexual assault than an intoxicated individual walking home alone from a bar. Additionally, drinking mostly occurs during the weekends- especially on college campuses. Therefore, weekdays may

be considered less risky for sexual assault compared to weekend days.

Risk factors such as drinking and staying out late at night may also occur more often on holidays (e.g., St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving, New Years Eve, etc.), so a seasonal component to risk assessment for sexual assault is important as well. A potential victim's age may also be a key factor in risk assessment because different age groups congregate at different locations and at different times.

## **Aggravating/Mitigating Risk Factors Based on a Review of Empirical Literature**

### **Spatial Correlates of Sexual Assault**

- ***Geographic Proximity to Bars/Clubs***

Offenders may prefer to target their victims when they are intoxicated and unable to pay attention to their personal safety. "Approximately 50% of sexual assaults involve alcohol"<sup>vi</sup>. It is also important to note that the offender may consume alcohol before a sexual assault; so too may the victim that may consume alcohol.

- ***Geographic Proximity to Schools/Colleges***

Sexual assault among college women is about three times that of sexual assault among the general population of women.<sup>vii</sup> Most rapes on campuses occur after heavy, or binge, drinking on campuses.<sup>viii</sup> Additionally, more than half of the college men (58%) who participated in a recent study reported committing some form of sexual assault.<sup>ix</sup>

- ***Geographic Proximity to Parks***

About 15% of sexual assaults take place in public locations such as streets or parks.<sup>x</sup> Offenders who victimize adults were found to live significantly closer to schools and parks than those who targeted children.<sup>xi</sup> Additionally, there appears to be no difference between proximity of offenders who victimize strangers compared to those who victimize family or acquaintances.<sup>xii</sup>

- ***Geographic Proximity to Offender's Residence***

Sexual assault offenders are restricted by law to live in certain areas and adhere to zoning restrictions (e.g., not residing within 2,500 ft. of a school). According to routine activities theory, an offender is not likely to travel too far outside of the vicinity of his/her home to commit the crime.<sup>xiii</sup> To date, no study has directly measured whether residence restrictions, or geographical proximity actually reduce recidivism of sexual offenders, therefore examination of where sex offenders reside (or are registered

as residing) may be beneficial if it is observed that many sexual assaults in a particular jurisdiction happen within close proximity to specific known sex offenders or places with high concentrations of known sex offenders residing.

### **Non-Spatial Correlates of Sexual Assault**

- ***Distribution of Age***

Young women are at greater risk than older women for interpersonal violence.<sup>xiv</sup> Additionally, most sexual assaults have been noted to occur on college campuses which further indicates a younger population at risk.

- ***Distribution of Gender***

Around 95% of sexual assault victims are women.<sup>xv</sup> Therefore, highly concentrated areas of females might be at a greater risk of victimization.

- ***Distribution of Wealth***

Wealth might not affect initial offending but it may be appropriate to examine for already registered sex offenders with regard to recidivism. Registered sex offenders tend to live in economically deprived areas because of residency restrictions and employment opportunities available to them.<sup>xvi</sup> Overall, research suggests that economic factors are a good predictor of an offender's choice of residence.<sup>xvii</sup>

- ***Distribution of Crime (Crime rates/trends)***

Areas with higher crime rates are often identified as correlates for sexual violence. "Ecological proximity to violence is an important determinant of victimization"<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Recommended (Publically Available) Readings**

**Beauregard, E., Proulx, J., Rossmo, D. K., Leclerc, B. and Allaire, J. F.** (2007). A script analysis of patterns in the hunting process of serial sex offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34, 1069-1084. <http://www.udel.edu/BibliotecaInvestigacion/Documentos/2008/MDH%20Psic%20Script%20Analysis%20of%20the%20Hunting%20Process%20of%20Serial%20Sex%20Offenders.pdf>.

**Mandelstam, J. and Mulford, C.** (2008). NIJ Update: Unintended Consequences of Sex Offender Residency Laws: Can GIS Mapping Help? *Corrections Today*. Retrieved October 2, 2010 from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/223565.pdf>.

**Schulz, D., and Gilbert, S.** (1996). Women and transit security: A new look at an old issue. In *Women's travel issues. Proceedings from the second national conference, October 1996*, edited by S. Rosenbloom and S. B. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. Retrieved October 6, 2010 from <http://204.68.195.102/ohim/womens/chap30.pdf>.

Walby, S. and Allen, J. (2004) *Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. Home Office Research Study 276. London: Home Office. Retrieved March 15, 2010 from <http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/04/hors276.pdf>.

Yeater, E. A., & O'Donohue, W. (1999). Sexual assault prevention programs: Current issues, future directions, and the potential efficacy of interventions with women. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 19, 739-771. Retrieved October 7, 2010 from <http://www.popcenter.org/problems/rape/PDFs/yeater.pdf>.

Zawacki, T., Abbey, A., Buck, P. O., McAuslan, P., & Clinton-Sherrod, A. M. (2003). Perpetrators of alcohol-involved sexual assaults: How do they differ from other sexual assault perpetrators and nonperpetrators? *Aggressive Behavior*, 29, 366-380. Retrieved October 6, 2010 from <http://www.swc.osu.edu/posts/documents/perpetrators-of-alcohol-involved-sexual-assaults-article-2003.pdf>.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> For steps of risk terrain map production, download the RTM Manual at [www.riskterrainmodeling.com](http://www.riskterrainmodeling.com).

<sup>ii</sup> Penetration is defined as "vaginal intercourse, cunnilingus, fellatio or anal intercourse between persons or the insertion of a hand, finger or other object into the anus or vagina by either the actor or upon the actor's instruction". See <http://www.state.nj.us/njsp/divorg/operations/vsu.html> for complete definition and see [http://www.nj-statute-info.com/getStatute.php?statute\\_id=1563](http://www.nj-statute-info.com/getStatute.php?statute_id=1563) for statute

<sup>iii</sup> "In most of the sexual assaults involving non-strangers, the crime occurs in the suspect or victim's own home, and many of them involve the use of drugs and alcohol by both victim and suspect" (See Archambault, J. (n.d.) from

[http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:HRLhoxsq\\_0sJ:www.mysati.com/Downloads/Handout\\_DSA.doc+In+most+of+the+sexual+assaults+involving+non-strangers,+the+crime+occurs+in+the+suspect+or+victim%27s+own+home,+and+many+of+them+involve+the+use+of+drugs+and+alcohol+by+both+victim+and+suspect&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:HRLhoxsq_0sJ:www.mysati.com/Downloads/Handout_DSA.doc+In+most+of+the+sexual+assaults+involving+non-strangers,+the+crime+occurs+in+the+suspect+or+victim%27s+own+home,+and+many+of+them+involve+the+use+of+drugs+and+alcohol+by+both+victim+and+suspect&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-a).

<sup>iv</sup> Pedophiles choose prepubescent children whereas hebephiles choose pubescent but not yet 18. (See Blanchard, 2009 at [http://teventerprises.com/uploads/Blanchard\\_DSM\\_Pedophilia\\_1\\_.pdf](http://teventerprises.com/uploads/Blanchard_DSM_Pedophilia_1_.pdf))

<sup>v</sup> Archambault, J. (n.d.)

<sup>vi</sup> Zawacki, et al. (2003)

<sup>vii</sup> Yeater and O'Donahue (1999)

<sup>viii</sup> Wechsler, H., Lee, J.E., Kuo, M. and Lee, H. (2000). College binge drinking in the 1990s: A continuing problem: Results of the Harvard School of Public Health 1999 College Alcohol Study. *Journal of American College Health*, 48, 199-210. Retrieved October 5, 2010 from [http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/Documents/cont\\_problem/rpt2000.pdf](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/Documents/cont_problem/rpt2000.pdf).

<sup>ix</sup> It is important to note that only 18% met legal definitions of rape/attempted rape, or sexual assault. (see Zawacki, et al., 2003)

<sup>x</sup> See Duwe, G., Donnay, W., & Tewksbury, R. (2008). Does residential proximity matter? A geographic analysis of sex offense recidivism. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35, 484-504. Retrieved October 14, 2010 from <http://cjb.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/35/4/484?ikey=ONL.WYYZbhMfU&keytype=ref&siteid=spcjb>.

<sup>xi</sup> Zgoba, K.M., Levenson, J., & McKee, T. (2009). Examining the impact of sex offender residence restrictions on housing availability. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 20, 91-110. (This costs \$25)

<sup>xii</sup> Chajewski, M., & Mercado, C.C. (2009). An evaluation of sex offender residency restriction functioning in town, county, and city-wide jurisdictions. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 20, 44-61. (This costs \$25) / Zgoba, K.M., Levenson, J., & McKee, T. (2009). Examining the impact of sex offender residence restrictions on housing availability. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 20, 91-110. (This costs \$25)

<sup>xiii</sup> Beauregard, et. al., (2007)

<sup>xiv</sup> Walby & Allen (2004)

<sup>xv</sup> Zawacki, et al. (2003)

<sup>xvi</sup> Levenson, J. S. (2007). Residence restrictions and their impact on sex offender reintegration, rehabilitation, and recidivism. *ATSA Forum*, XVIII(2). Retrieved October 14, 2010 from <http://blueshift.com/miscellaneous/incoming/ASTA%20-%20Residence%20restrictions%20and%20their%20impact%20on%20sex%20offender%20reintegration%20and%20rehabilitation%20and%20recidivism%20-%202007.pdf>.

<sup>xvii</sup> Tewksbury, R., & Mustaine, E.E. (2008). Where registered sex offenders live: Community characteristics and proximity to possible victims. *Victims & Offenders*, 3, 86-98. (This costs \$30)

<sup>xviii</sup> Cobbin, J. E., Miller, J., & Brunson, R. K. (2008). Gender, neighborhood danger, and risk avoidance strategies among urban African American youth. *Criminology*, 46(3), 673-709. Retrieved October 3, 2010 from <http://www.umsl.edu/~ccj/pdfs/Gender%20neighborhood%20danger%20and%20risk%20avoidance.pdf>.