

Partial covers of $\text{PG}(n, q)$

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Abstract

In this paper, we show that a set of $q+a$ hyperplanes, $q > 13$, $a \leq (q-10)/4$, that does not cover $\text{PG}(n, q)$, does not cover at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ points, and show that this lower bound is sharp. If the number of non-covered points is at most q^{n-1} , then we show that all non-covered points are contained in one hyperplane. Finally, using a recent result of Blokhuis, Brouwer, and Szőnyi [3], we remark that the bound on a for which these results are valid can be improved to $a < (q-2)/3$ and that this upper bound on a is sharp.

1 Introduction

Let $\text{PG}(n, q)$ denote the n -dimensional projective space over the finite field \mathbb{F}_q with q elements, where $q = p^h$, p prime, $h \geq 1$. We denote the number of points in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ by θ_n , i.e., $\theta_n = \frac{q^{n+1}-1}{q-1}$.

Let \mathcal{C} be a family of $q+a$ hyperplanes of $\text{PG}(n, q)$. Denote by $\mathcal{C}(P)$ the set of hyperplanes of \mathcal{C} containing P . A $(q+a)$ -cover \mathcal{C} of $\text{PG}(n, q)$ is a family \mathcal{C} of $q+a$ different hyperplanes in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ such that $|\mathcal{C}(P)| \geq 1, \forall P \in \text{PG}(n, q)$. A *partial* $(q+a)$ -cover \mathcal{S} is a set of $q+a$ hyperplanes such that there is at least one point Q in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ such that $|\mathcal{S}(Q)| = 0$. A point H for which $|\mathcal{S}(H)| = 0$, is called a *hole* of \mathcal{S} . We denote the set of holes of \mathcal{S} by $\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}$.

A *blocking set* of $\text{PG}(n, q)$ is a set B of points such that each hyperplane of $\text{PG}(n, q)$ contains at least one point of B . A blocking set B is called *trivial* if it contains a line of $\text{PG}(n, q)$. If a hyperplane contains exactly one point of a blocking set B in $\text{PG}(n, q)$, it is called a *tangent hyperplane* to B , and a point P of B is called *essential* when it belongs to a tangent hyperplane to B . A blocking set B is called *minimal* when no proper subset of B is also a blocking set, i.e., when each point of B is essential.

It is clear that a cover of $\text{PG}(n, q)$ is a dual blocking set. Dualizing the above definitions yields that a cover \mathcal{C} is called *trivial* if it contains all hyperplanes through a certain $(n-2)$ -space and *minimal* if no proper subset of \mathcal{C} is a cover. A hyperplane π is *essential* to a cover \mathcal{C} if there is a point $P \in \pi$ such that $\mathcal{C}(P) = \{\pi\}$.

The following reducibility results will be used throughout this article.

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Result 1. [7, Remark 3.3] A blocking set of size at most $2q$ in $\text{PG}(2, q)$ is uniquely reducible to a minimal blocking set.

Result 2. [6, Corollary 1] A blocking set of size smaller than $2q$ in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ is uniquely reducible to a minimal blocking set.

In Theorem 7, we extend the following result of Blokhuis and Brouwer to general dimension.

Result 3. [2] Let B be a blocking set in $\text{PG}(2, q)$. If $|B| = 2q - s$, then there are at least $s + 1$ tangent lines through each essential point of B .

Finally, for q a prime, we use the following result, proven by Blokhuis [1] for $n = 2$.

Result 4. [5] Let B be a non-trivial blocking set in $\text{PG}(n, p)$, where p is an odd prime. Then

$$|B| \geq 3(p + 1)/2.$$

2 Partial covers of $\text{PG}(2, q)$

Throughout this section, \mathcal{S} will denote a partial $(q + a)$ -cover of $\text{PG}(2, q)$, with $0 \leq a \leq (q - 10)/4$, $q > 13$.

Theorem 5. If $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q + a$, then $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q$, and the holes are collinear.

Proof. Let $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| = x$. Suppose that there are three non-collinear points in $\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}$, otherwise the theorem is proven. The set $\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}$ can be covered by at most $(x+1)/2$ lines, denote the set of these lines by \mathcal{L} . Let \mathcal{L}' be the minimal cover of $\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}$ contained in \mathcal{L} . The set $\mathcal{S} \cup \mathcal{L}'$ is a cover in $\text{PG}(2, q)$. Since the size of $\mathcal{S} \cup \mathcal{L}'$ is at most $q + a + (q + a + 1)/2 \leq 2q$, there is a unique minimal cover \mathcal{C} contained in $\mathcal{S} \cup \mathcal{L}'$ (Result 1).

Let $\ell_y \in \mathcal{L}'$ be a y -secant to $\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}$ with $y \leq (q - 3a - 1)/2$. Interchanging ℓ_y by y other lines gives, together with the lines of \mathcal{S} , another cover \mathcal{C}' , with $|\mathcal{C} \cup \mathcal{C}'| \leq q + a + (q + a + 1)/2 + (q - 3a - 1)/2 \leq 2q$. Hence, by the unique reducibility property, there is a unique minimal cover contained in $\mathcal{C} \cup \mathcal{C}'$, hence in $\mathcal{C} \cap \mathcal{C}'$. This minimal cover does not contain ℓ_y , hence \mathcal{L}' contains only lines with at least $(q - 3a - 1)/2$ holes.

If $|\mathcal{L}'| = 1$, then the theorem is proven. Remark that if there is only one long secant and there are q holes, then $a = 0$.

Suppose that $|\mathcal{L}'| = z$. These z secants, together with the $q + a$ lines of \mathcal{S} , form a cover \mathcal{C}'' . Then there is a line L in \mathcal{L}' with less than $(q + a + 1 + \binom{z}{2})/z$ holes. Suppose to the contrary that any line in \mathcal{L}' contains at least $(q + a + 1 + \binom{z}{2})/z$ holes, then there are at least $z(q + a + 1 + \binom{z}{2})/z - \binom{z}{2} = q + a + 1 > q + a$ holes, a contradiction. We construct a new cover by replacing this line L with less than $(q + a + 1 + \binom{z}{2})/z$ lines, one through each hole on L . In total, with the z secants and the lines of \mathcal{S} , this set of lines constitutes a cover \mathcal{C}''' of size at most $q + a + z + (q + a + 1 + \binom{z}{2})/z$. If

$$q + a + z + (q + a + 1 + \binom{z}{2})/z \leq 2q, \quad (1)$$

the unique reducibility property (Result 1) shows that there is a minimal cover contained in $\mathcal{C}'' \cap \mathcal{C}'''$, which does not contain the line L . This implies that the line L was not essential to the cover \mathcal{C}'' , a contradiction. It is easy to check that for $z \geq 2$ and $z < 9$, inequality (1) holds for $a \leq (q - 10)/4$ and $q > 13$. Hence, there are at least 9 long secants essential to the minimal cover \mathcal{C}'' . On each of these secants, there are at least $(q - 3a - 1)/2$ holes, hence we have at least $9(q - 3a - 1)/2 - 9 \cdot 8/2$ holes. But

$$9(q - 3a - 1)/2 - 36 > q + a$$

if $a < (7q - 63)/25$. Since $a \leq (q - 10)/4$, and $(q - 10)/4 < (7q - 63)/25$, the theorem follows. \square

Corollary 6. *Let q be a prime. If $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q + a$, then \mathcal{S} consists of q lines through the same point R and a lines l_1, \dots, l_a , not through R .*

Proof. It follows from Theorem 5 that the holes are contained in one line, say M . Then the lines of \mathcal{S} , together with M , constitute a cover \mathcal{C} of size $q + a + 1 < 3(q + 1)/2$. Result 4, together with Result 1, shows that the unique minimal cover contained in \mathcal{C} is the set of all lines through a point R . It is clear that the line M is one of the lines through R . The other a lines are random, but do not contain R . \square

3 Partial covers of $\text{PG}(n, q)$

Before extending the results of Section 2 to general dimension, we need the extension of Result 3.

Theorem 7. *The number of tangent hyperplanes through an essential point of a blocking set B of size $q + a + 1$, $|B| \leq 2q$, in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ is at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$.*

Proof. The arguments of this proof are based on the proof of Proposition 2.5 in [8].

For $n = 2$, Result 3 proves this theorem. Assume by induction that the theorem holds for all dimensions $i \leq n - 1$. Let B be a blocking set in $\pi = \text{PG}(n, q)$. Since $|B| \leq 2q$, there is an $(n - 2)$ -space L in π that is skew to B . Let H be a hyperplane through L . Embed π in $\text{PG}(2n - 2, q)$. Let P be a $\text{PG}(n - 3, q)$, skew to π , in $\text{PG}(2n - 2, q)$. Then $\langle B, P \rangle$, the cone with vertex P and base B , is a blocking set with respect to the $(n - 1)$ -spaces of $\text{PG}(2n - 2, q)$. Let $H^* \neq H$ be a hyperplane through L only sharing one point Q with B . Since $|B|$ is at most $2q$, there are at least 2 tangent hyperplanes through L , hence H^* can be chosen different from H .

Let \mathcal{S} be a regular $(n - 2)$ -spread through L and $\langle Q, P \rangle$ in W , the $(2n - 3)$ -dimensional space spanned by L and $\langle Q, P \rangle$. Using the André-Bruck-Bose construction (see [4]), this yields a projective plane $\text{PG}(2, q^{n-1}) = \Pi^W$. The arguments of [8, Proposition 2.5] show that H defines a line ℓ in Π^W , only having essential points of the blocking set \bar{B} of size $1 + (q + a)q^{n-2} = q^{n-1} + aq^{n-2} + 1$, where \bar{B} is the blocking set in $\text{PG}(2, q^{n-1})$, corresponding to $\langle B, P \rangle$. This number of points comes from $\langle Q, P \rangle$ at infinity, which is one point of the blocking set, and the $q + a$ affine points R_i of B , all on a cone $\langle R_i, P \rangle$ with q^{n-2} affine points. Result 3 shows that any essential point of \bar{B} lies on at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$

tangent lines to the blocking set \bar{B} in Π^W . We will show that the number of tangent lines through an essential point of the blocking set \bar{B} in Π^W is a lower bound on the number of tangent hyperplanes through an essential point of B in $\text{PG}(n, q)$.

A tangent line through an affine essential point R of \bar{B} corresponds to an $(n-1)$ -space $\langle R, \Omega \rangle$, with Ω a spread element of \mathcal{S} . The space $\langle R, \Omega \rangle$ is not necessarily a tangent hyperplane to B in $\text{PG}(n, q)$. Note that $\Omega \neq \langle Q, P \rangle$, since both are spread elements and cannot coincide since $\langle Q, P \rangle$ is an element of the blocking set, hence $\langle R, Q, P \rangle$ cannot be a tangent space.

The projection of $\langle R, \Omega \rangle$ from P onto $\text{PG}(n, q)$ is an $(n-1)$ -dimensional space through R in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ which is skew to Q since $\Omega \cap \langle Q, P \rangle = \emptyset$, and which only has R in common with B since $\langle \Omega, R \rangle \cap \langle B, P \rangle = \{R\}$. Hence, this projection is a tangent $(n-1)$ -space through R to B in $\text{PG}(n, q)$. So we have shown that any tangent line in R to \bar{B} gives rise to a tangent hyperplane to B in R . If any tangent line to \bar{B} in R gives rise to a different tangent hyperplane to B , the theorem is proven.

Let η be a tangent hyperplane to B in R which is the projection of two tangent lines $\langle \Omega, R \rangle$ and $\langle \Omega', R \rangle$. The dimension of $\langle \eta, P \rangle$ is $2n-3$, and $\dim(\langle \eta, P \rangle \cap W) = 2n-4$. A hyperplane of $\text{PG}(2n-3, q)$ contains exactly one element of a regular $(n-2)$ -spread. Since it contains Ω and Ω' , $\Omega = \Omega'$. So η is the projection of at most one such $(n-1)$ -space.

For every essential point Q of B , it is possible to select a tangent hyperplane H through Q , and to let this tangent hyperplane H play the role described in the preceding paragraph. Since Q is an affine essential point, this implies that Q lies in at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ tangent hyperplanes to B . \square

Lemma 8. *Let \mathcal{S} be a partial $(q+a)$ -cover of $\text{PG}(n, q)$, $a < q$. If all holes of \mathcal{S} are contained in a hyperplane π of $\text{PG}(n, q)$, then $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \geq q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$.*

Proof. The hyperplanes of \mathcal{S} , together with the hyperplane π that contains all holes, form a cover of size $q+a+1$, in which π is an essential hyperplane. Dualizing gives a blocking set B of size $q+a+1$, where the dual of π is an essential point. Theorem 7 shows that the dual of π lies on at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ tangent hyperplanes to B . Dualizing again shows that π contains at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ points that are only covered by π . Removing π shows that there are at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ holes. \square

Remark 9. *The lower bound in Lemma 8 is sharp. Let \mathcal{S} be the set of q hyperplanes through a fixed $(n-2)$ -space π_{n-2} . Let H be the hyperplane through π_{n-2} , which is not chosen. Take a hyperplane for which the $(n-2)$ -dimensional intersections with H are all distinct and go through a common $(n-3)$ -space of π_{n-2} , then there are exactly $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ holes.*

From now on, \mathcal{S} denotes a partial $(q+a)$ -cover of $\text{PG}(n, q)$, $n \geq 3$. We denote the following property by (A_x) :

(A_x) If \mathcal{S} is a partial $(q+b)$ -cover in $\text{PG}(2, q)$, $b \leq x < (q-2)/3$, with at most $q+b$ holes, then $q-b \leq |\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q$ and the holes are collinear.

Note that we have shown in Theorem 5 and Lemma 8 that the property (A_x) holds for $x \leq (q-10)/4$, $q > 13$.

Lemma 10. *Assume (A_x) for all $x \leq a$. If a partial cover \mathcal{S}' of $\text{PG}(2, q)$ contains 3 non-collinear holes, then $|\mathcal{S}'| > q + a$.*

Proof. If $|\mathcal{S}'| = q + a$, this follows immediately from property (A_x) . So suppose that $|\mathcal{S}'| = q + x'$, $x' < a$, and that there are 3 non-collinear holes, say H_1, H_2, H_3 . Let P be a point not on H_1H_2 , H_1H_3 , or H_2H_3 . Adding $a - x'$ lines through P , different from PH_1, PH_2, PH_3 , to the partial cover \mathcal{S}' gives a cover \mathcal{S}'' , with $|\mathcal{S}''| = q + a$. Applying property (A_x) to \mathcal{S}'' , the corollary follows. \square

Lemma 11. *Assume (A_x) for all $x \leq a$, and $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q^{n-1}$. A line that contains 2 holes of \mathcal{S} , contains at least $a + 3$ holes of \mathcal{S} .*

Proof. Let L be a line with t holes, $t < q - a$, and let π be a plane through L . Assumption (A_x) shows that if π contains at most $q + a$ holes, there are at least $q - a$ holes, which are all collinear, a contradiction. Hence, every plane through L contains at least $q + a + 1$ holes, which implies that there are at least

$$\theta_{n-2}(q + a + 1 - t) + t$$

holes in $\text{PG}(n, q)$, which has to be at most q^{n-1} . If $t = a + 2$, $\theta_{n-2}(q + a + 1 - a - 2) + a + 2 > q^{n-1}$, a contradiction. Hence, t is at least $a + 3$. \square

Lemma 12. *Assume (A_x) for all $x \leq a$, and $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q^{n-1}$. Every hole of \mathcal{S} lies on more than $q^{n-2}/2$ lines with at least $q - a$ holes.*

Proof. Let R be a hole. There is a line L through R containing only covered points and R , otherwise there would be at least $\theta_{n-1} + 1$ holes. Using assumption (A_x) and Lemma 10, we see that a plane through L contains either at most $q - 1$ holes on a line through R , different from L , or it contains at least $q + x$ holes different from R .

Suppose that there are X planes through L with at most $q - 1$ holes different from R . Using assumption (A_x) and Lemma 10, we see that the number of holes is at least

$$X(q - a - 1) + (\theta_{n-2} - X)(q + a) + 1,$$

which has to be at most q^{n-1} . Putting $X = q^{n-2}/2$ yields a contradiction. Hence, there are more than $q^{n-2}/2$ planes with at most q holes. Again using assumption (A_x) , we see that in each of these planes, there is a line through R containing at least $q - a - 1$ other holes, and all holes in such a plane lie on this line. \square

Theorem 13. *Assume (A_x) for all $x \leq a$, and $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q^{n-1}$. Then the holes of \mathcal{S} are contained in one hyperplane of $\text{PG}(n, q)$.*

Proof. For $n = 2$, this is assumption (A_x) with $x = a$. Suppose by induction that this theorem holds for any dimension $i \leq n - 1$.

First, we show that there is a hyperplane π of $\text{PG}(n, q)$ with at most q^{n-2} holes. Let R be a hole. There is a line L through R containing only covered points and R . Suppose that all planes through L contain more than q holes, then there would be at least $\theta_{n-2}q + 1$ holes, a contradiction. Suppose that there is a d -dimensional space π_d with at most q^{d-1} holes. Then there is a $(d + 1)$ -dimensional space containing π_d with at most q^d holes. Otherwise, the

number of holes would be at least $\theta_{n-d-1}(q^d + 1 - q^{d-1}) + q^{d-1}$, a contradiction if $d \leq n - 1$. Hence, by induction, there is a hyperplane π of $\text{PG}(n, q)$ with at most q^{n-2} holes.

Using the induction hypothesis, all holes in π are contained in an $(n - 2)$ -dimensional space π_{n-2} of π . Moreover, Lemma 8 shows that the number of holes in π_{n-2} is at least $q^{n-2} - aq^{n-3}$.

There are at least $\theta_{n-2}(q - a - 1) + 1$ holes in $\text{PG}(n, q)$ since every plane through L contains at least $q - a - 1$ extra holes. Hence, there is certainly a hole R' that is not contained in π_{n-2} .

Now we distinguish between two cases.

Case 1: All lines through R' with at least $q - a$ holes are lines which intersect π_{n-2} . Lemma 12 shows that there are at least $q^{n-2}/2$ such lines. Since a line through two holes contains at least $a + 3$ holes (see Lemma 11), counting the holes in $\langle R', \pi_{n-2} \rangle$ yields that this number is at least

$$q^{n-2}(q - a - 1)/2 + (q^{n-2} - aq^{n-3} - q^{n-2}/2)(a + 2) + 1.$$

If all holes are contained in $\langle R', \pi_{n-2} \rangle$, the theorem is proven. Suppose now that not all holes are contained in the hyperplane $\langle R', \pi_{n-2} \rangle$. Let R'' be a hole not in $\langle R', \pi_{n-2} \rangle$. Connecting R'' with all the holes in $\langle R', \pi_{n-2} \rangle$ yields at least $(a + 2)(q^{n-2}(q - a - 1)/2 + (q^{n-2} - aq^{n-3} - q^{n-2}/2)(a + 2) + 1) + 1$ holes, which is more than q^{n-1} , a contradiction.

Case 2: There is a line through R' , skew to π_{n-2} , with at least $q - a$ holes. This yields at least

$$(q - a)(q^{n-2} - aq^{n-3})(a + 1) + q^{n-2} - aq^{n-3} + q - a > q^{n-1}$$

holes, a contradiction. \square

Theorem 14. *Assume (A_x) for all $x \leq a$, then the number of holes of \mathcal{S} is at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$.*

Proof. This follows immediately from Theorem 13 and Lemma 8. \square

Corollary 15. *Assume (A_x) for all $x \leq a$, and $|\mathcal{H}_{\mathcal{S}}| \leq q^{n-1}$. If q is a prime, \mathcal{S} consists of q hyperplanes through a common $(n - 2)$ -space π and a other hyperplanes, not through π .*

Proof. It follows from Theorem 13 that the holes are contained in one hyperplane, say μ . Then the hyperplanes of \mathcal{S} , together with μ , constitute a cover \mathcal{C} of size $q + a + 1 < 3(q + 1)/2$. Result 4, together with Result 2, shows that the unique minimal cover contained in \mathcal{C} is the set of all hyperplanes through an $(n - 2)$ -space π . Since this set covers $\text{PG}(n, q)$ entirely, the hyperplane μ is one of the hyperplanes through π . The other a hyperplanes are random, but do not contain π . \square

As remarked before, assumption (A_x) holds for all partial $(q + a)$ -covers of $\text{PG}(n, q)$, $x \leq (q - 10)/4$, $q > 13$.

However, a recent result of Blokhuis, Brouwer and Szőnyi [3] shows that assumption (A_x) is valid for all x , where $x < (q - 2)/3$. Moreover, the following example shows that the upper bound $a < (q - 2)/3$ is sharp.

Example 16. Let $a = (q - 2)/3$ and let \mathcal{S} be a set of $q - 1$ lines L_i through a point P , and $a + 1$ other lines through a fixed point, lying on one of the lines L_i . Then there are $2(q - a - 1) = q + a$ holes, lying on two lines.

Combining Theorems 13, 14 and Corollary 15 with the result of Brouwer, Blokhuis and Szőnyi, yields the following theorem.

Theorem 17. If \mathcal{S} is a partial $(q + a)$ -cover of $\text{PG}(n, q)$, $a < (q - 2)/3$, with at most q^{n-1} holes, then there are at least $q^{n-1} - aq^{n-2}$ holes and the holes are contained in one hyperplane. If q is a prime, \mathcal{S} consists of q hyperplanes through a common $(n - 2)$ -space π and a other hyperplanes, not through π .

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