Exponential Lower Bounds on the Generalized Erdős-Ginzburg-Ziv Constant

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Abstract

For a finite abelian group $G$, the generalized Erdős–Ginzburg–Ziv constant $s_k(G)$ is the smallest $m$ such that a sequence of $m$ elements in $G$ always contains a $k$-element subsequence which sums to zero. If $n = \exp(G)$ is the exponent of $G$, the previously best known bounds for $s_{kn}(C^r_n)$ were linear in $n$ and $r$ when $k \geq 2$. Via a probabilistic argument, we produce the exponential lower bound

$$s_{2n}(C^r_n) > \frac{n}{2}[1.25 + o(1)]^r$$

for $n > 0$. For the general case, we show

$$s_{kn}(C^r_n) > \frac{kn}{4} \left(1 + \frac{1}{ek + 1} + o(1)\right)^r.$$

1 Introduction

In 1961, Erdős, Ginzburg, and Ziv [3] proved that among any $2n - 1$ integers, some $n$ of them sum to a multiple of $n$. Equivalently, among every sequence (with repetition) of $2n - 1$ elements in $C_n := Z/nZ$, some $n$ sum to zero (for brevity, given a sequence, we call a subsequence of length $n$ an $n$-subsequence).

This result led naturally to the study of restricted-length zero-sum subsequences in finite abelian groups. Recall that the exponent $\exp(G)$ of a finite group is the largest order among its elements.

Definition 1. If $G$ is a finite abelian group and $n = \exp(G)$, the $k$-th generalized EGZ constant of $G$, denoted $s_{kn}(G)$, is the smallest $m$ for which any sequence of $m$ elements of $G$ contains a zero-sum $kn$-subsequence.

The EGZ problem, especially in the “smallest” case of $k = 1$, has proven to be surprisingly difficult. The only $r$ for which $s_n(C^r_n)$ has been exactly determined are $r = 1$ and $r = 2$. The fact that $s_n(C_n) = 2n - 1$ is the original Erdős-Ginzburg-Ziv Theorem [3], while $s_n(C^2_n) = 4n - 3$ is the famous Kemnitz conjecture and was only recently settled by Reiher [10]. Reiher’s theorem builds on the polynomial method of Rónyai [11], which has proved fruitful for providing upper bounds to $s_{kn}(C^r_n)$ in higher ranks $r \geq 3$, especially when $k$ is somewhat large compared to $r$.

Major progress on the hardest case $k = 1$ was recently made by Naslund [9], obtaining an exponential improvement on the upper bounds on $s_p(C^r_p)$ for general $r$ by using the “multi-slice-rank” method. This technique generalizes that of Ellenberg and Gijswijt [2] and Croot, Lev, and Pach [1] on the closely related cap-set problem. Specifically, Naslund shows that

$$s_p(C^r_p) < 3p!(2p - 1)(J(p)p)^r,$$
where \( J(p) \) is a constant, depending on \( p \), which lies between .841 and .918 and decreases as \( p \) grows.

We turn our attention to \( s_{kn}(C^r_n) \) for higher values of \( k \). Gao and Thangadurai [5] proved that
\[
5p + \frac{p^2}{4} - 3 \leq s_{2p}(C^3_p) \leq 6p - 3,
\]
and that \( s_{kp}(C^3_p) = (k + 3)p - 3 \) for \( k \geq 4 \). Kubertin [8] extended the latter result to the \( k = 3 \) case, and also showed that \( s_{4p}(C^3_p) = 8p - 4 \). These results contribute to the following conjecture, made in a more general form by Gao and Thangadurai [5].

**Conjecture 1.** For all \( k \geq r \), and sufficiently large \( n \), \( s_{kn}(C^r_n) = (k + r)n - r \).

Extending the work of Rónyai [11] and Kubertin [8], it was shown by He [7] that the conjecture holds for prime \( n \) when \( k \geq p + r \) and \( 2p \geq 7r - 3 \). For a survey of related zero-sum problems and their generalizations, see [4].

When \( n \) is an odd prime and \( k = 1 \), Harborth [6] gives the elementary lower bound
\[
s_2(n)(C^r_n) > 2^r(n - 1),
\]
but no similar bound exponential in \( r \) was known for \( k \geq 2 \). In this paper, we provide lower bound constructions for \( s_{kn}(C^r_n) \) when \( k \) is much smaller than \( r \).

**Theorem 1.** The generalized EGZ constant \( s_{2n}(C^r_n) \) satisfies the bound
\[
s_{2n}(C^r_n) > n \left( \frac{5}{4} + o(1) \right)^r.
\]

That is, there is a sequence of this length in \( C^r_n \) that contains no zero-sum \( 2n \)-subsequence. This result is the first exponential lower bound on \( s_{2n}(C^r_n) \) for an arbitrary \( r \).

Generalizing this to arbitrary values of \( k \), we also prove

**Theorem 2.** Let \( k > 2 \). The generalized EGZ constant \( s_{kn}(C^r_n) \) satisfies the bound
\[
s_{kn}(C^r_n) > \frac{kn}{4} \left[ 1 + \frac{1}{ek + 1} + o(1) \right]^r.
\]

In both results, the \( o(1) \) term goes to zero as \( n \) grows.

## 2 Lower Bounds on \( s_{kn}(C^r_n) \)

We first give the proof of **Theorem 1**.

**Proof of Theorem 1.** Let
\[
N = \frac{n}{2} A^r
\]
for a value of \( A \) which will be specified later. Choose a sequence \( X \) of \( N \) random vectors in \( \{0,1\}^r \) as follows. For each \( v = (v_1, \ldots, v_r) \) that is a term of \( X \), let each \( v_i = 1 \) with probability \( q \) and \( v_i = 0 \) with probability \( 1 - q \), with each \( v_i \) chosen independently. Let \( Z \) be the number of zero-sum length \( 2n \)-subsequences in \( X \). We will produce an \( A \) such that \( E[Z] < 1 \), so that there must be some possible \( X \) with no such subsequences.

Consider some arbitrary \( 2n \)-subsequence \( Y \) of \( X \). For \( Y \) to be zero-sum, each of the \( r \) coordinates must sum to 0 mod \( n \), and so contain exactly 0, \( n \), or \( 2n \) ones. For any coordinate \( i \leq r \), let \( P_0 \) be the
probability that coordinate \( i \) contains 0 ones, \( P_n \) the probability that it contains \( n \) ones, and \( P_{2n} \) the probability that it contains \( 2n \) ones (clearly, this is not dependent on \( i \)). We have

\[
\begin{align*}
P_0 &= (1 - q)^{2n} \\
P_n &= \binom{2n}{n} q^n (1 - q)^n \\
P_{2n} &= q^{2n},
\end{align*}
\]

the values from a standard binomial distribution with probability of success \( q \).

Now, if \( Q \) is the probability that coordinate \( i \) sums to zero, we have

\[
Q = P_0 + P_n + P_{2n}.
\]

We wish to minimize \( Q \). We proceed by choosing \( q \) so that \( P_0 \) grows slowly while still dominating. Calculations indicate that we ought to allow \( q \) to equal \( 4/5 \). Using the bound \( \binom{2n}{n} \leq 4^n / \sqrt{3n + 1} \), we then have

\[
Q \leq \left( \frac{4}{5} \right)^{2n} + \frac{1}{\sqrt{3n + 1}} \left( \frac{4}{5} \right)^{2n} + \left( \frac{1}{5} \right)^{2n} < \left( 1 + \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}} \right) \left( \frac{4}{5} \right)^{2n}.
\]

Since \( Q \) is the probability that any one coordinate in \( Y \) sums to zero, the probability that \( Y \) as a whole is zero-sum is \( Q^r \). Since each \( 2n \)-subsequence of \( X \) is zero-sum with equal probability, we have

\[
E[Z] = \binom{N}{2n} Q^r < \left( \frac{2N}{n} \right)^{2n} \left( 1 + \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}} \right)^r \left( \frac{4}{5} \right)^{2nr} < A^{2nr} \left( 1 + \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}} \right)^r \left( \frac{4}{5} \right)^{2nr}.
\]

To obtain \( E[Z] < 1 \), it is sufficient to have

\[
A^{2nr} \left( 1 + \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}} \right)^r \left( \frac{4}{5} \right)^{2nr} < 1
\]

\[
A < \frac{5}{4} \left( 1 + \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}} \right)^{-\frac{1}{2nr}}.
\]

So, we can take \( A = \frac{5}{4} + o(1) \).

It is possible to improve Theorem 1 by a subexponential factor using the Lovasz Local Lemma, but the exponential constant \( 5/4 \) appears to be the natural limit of the method.

The proof of Theorem 2 is similar.

**Proof of Theorem 2** If we repeat the above construction in the general case, we first must calculate the probability that a given coordinate \( i \leq r \) sums to zero. We now have \( k+1 \) component probabilities, \( P_0 \) through \( P_{kn} \). By the same logic as above, we see that

\[
P_{in} = \binom{kn}{in} q^{in} (1 - q)^{(k-i)n}.
\]
We again wish to have $P_0$ dominate while growing slowly. This time calculations suggest allowing $q$ to equal $1/(ek+1)$. Note that when $P_0$ dominates we have the bound $Q < (k+1)(1-q)^{kn}$. Then, if $N = \frac{k}{4^n} A^r$, we have

$$\mathbb{E}[Z] = \binom{N}{k} Q^r < \left( \frac{4N}{kn} \right)^{kn} (k+1)^r (1-q)^{knr}.$$ 

If we want $\mathbb{E}[Z] < 1$, we must have

$$\left( \frac{4N}{kn} \right)^{kn} (k+1)^r (1-q)^{knr} < 1$$

and thus

$$A < \frac{1}{(k+1)^{1/kn}(1-q)} \leq \frac{1}{(k+1)^{1/kn} \left(1 - \frac{1}{2e+1}\right)}.$$ 

So, we have $A = 1 + \frac{1}{2e+1} + o(1)$, as desired. \hfill \square

When $q$ is determined as above, the permissible values of $A$ approach one as $k$ and $n$ grow. Therefore, the result gives us little if we seek a bound on $s_{kn}(C'_n)$ for completely general $k$ and $n$. However, if we fix a specific value of $k$ (for example, if we are interested in $s_{3n}$), we can still attempt to optimize $q$ in order to achieve an exponential lower bound - it just will not be as effective for large $k$.

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