MIDPOINTS OF SEGMENTS INDUCED BY A POINT SET

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Abstract

Applying some well known results in additive number theory, we partially answer two geometric questions due to V. Bálint et al. and F. Hurtado. (1) Let $m(n)$ be the largest integer m with the property that from every set of n points in the plane one can select m elements so that none of them is the midpoint of two others. It is shown that $n^{1-c/\sqrt{\log n}} \leq m(n) \leq n/\log^{c'} n$. (2) Let $\mu(n)$ be the smallest number of distinct midpoints of all segments induced by n points in the plane, no 3 of which are collinear. It is proved that $\lim_{n\to\infty} \mu(n)/n = \infty$ and that $\mu(n) \leq ne^{c''\sqrt{\log n}}$. Here c, c', and c'' denote suitable positive constants.

1 Introduction

Many extremal problems in discrete geometry lead to questions in additive number theory [12]. This is partly due to the fact that their solutions are known or conjectured to be lattice-like, i.e., affinely equivalent to the integer lattice. Here we present two planar examples.

Bálint et al. [1] (see also [10], p. 27.) investigated the following question. A set of points in the plane is said to be *midpoint-free* if it has no pair of elements whose midpoint also belongs to the set. Let $m(n)$

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denote the largest number m such that every set of n points in the plane has a midpoint-free subset of size m. It was proved in [1] that

$$\lceil\frac{-1+\sqrt{8n+1}}{2}\rceil \leq m(n),$$

and it was conjectured that the order of magnitude of this bound cannot be improved, i.e., we have $m(n) = O(\sqrt{n})$. However, it follows from the existence of relatively dense sets of integers containing no 3-term arithmetic progression that this conjecture is wrong.

Theorem 1. *There are positive constants c, c' such that*

$$n^{1-c/\sqrt{\log n}} \leq m(n) \leq n/\log^{c'} n.$$

F. Hurtado raised the following problem. For any point set P, let $M(P)$ denote the set of midpoints of all the $\binom{n}{2}$ segments spanned by point pairs in P. Determine $\mu(n) = \min_{|P|=n} |M(P)|$, where the minimum is taken over all sets of n points in the plane, no 3 of which are collinear.

Hurtado and Urrutia showed that $\mu(n) = O(n^{\log_2 3}) \approx O(n^{1.585})$, but no superlinear lower bound was known. Using an idea of Behrend and Freiman's theory of set addition, we prove

Theorem 2. *There is a positive constant c such that*

$$\mu(n) \leq ne^{c\sqrt{\log n}}.$$

Furthermore, we have $\lim_{n\to\infty} \mu(n)/n = \infty$.

In the next two sections, we establish Theorems 1 and 2, resp., while in the last section some related questions are discussed.

2 Proof of Theorem 1

Consider a set P of n points in the plane with no midpoint-free subset of size larger than $m(n)$. First, choose (e.g., randomly) a straight line ℓ so that the orthogonal projection $\phi : P \to \ell$ takes P into an n-element set P' satisfying the following condition: for any $p_i, p_j, p_k \in P$, the midpoint of the segment $p_i p_k$ is p_j if and only if $\phi(p_i), \phi(p_j)$, and $\phi(p_k)$ (in this order) form an arithmetic progression of length 3. Using simultaneous approximation [8], for any positive integer q, we can replace each point $\phi(p_i)$ by a rational number r_i/q, such that $r_i = r_i(q)$ is an integer and

$$|\phi(p_i) - \frac{r_i}{q}| \leq \frac{1}{q^{1+1/n}}$$

holds for all $1 \leq i \leq n$.

There exists a sufficiently large q satisfying the following condition: each triple $(\phi(p_i), \phi(p_j), \phi(p_k))$ forms an arithmetic progression (in this order) if and only if (r_i, r_j, r_k) does. Indeed, we have

$$|(\phi(p_i) + \phi(p_k) - 2\phi(p_j))q - (r_i + r_k - 2r_j)| \leq$$

$$|q\phi(p_i) - r_i| + |q\phi(p_k) - r_k| + 2|q\phi(p_j) - r_j| \leq \frac{4}{q^{1/n}}.$$

Assuming that $q > 4^n$, if $\phi(p_i) + \phi(p_k) - 2\phi(p_j) = 0$ holds for some triple, we obtain that $|r_i + r_k - 2r_j| < 1$ so that $r_i + r_k - 2r_j = 0$ must also be true. In the reverse direction, assume indirectly that $\phi(p_i) + \phi(p_k) - 2\phi(p_j)$ is not equal to zero, but $r_i(q) + r_k(q) - 2r_j(q) = 0$ holds for infinitely many values of q. For these values, we have

$$|\phi(p_i) + \phi(p_k) - 2\phi(p_j)| \leq \frac{4}{q^{1+1/n}},$$

which leads to a contradiction, as q tends to infinity.

Thus, we have reduced the problem to the following: determine the largest positive integer $m_3'(n)$ such that every set of n integers has a subset of size $m_3'(n)$ which contains no arithmetic progression of length 3.

Let $m_3(n)$ denote the largest number of elements that can be chosen from the first n positive integers without containing a 3-term arithmetic progression. Clearly, we have $m_3'(n) \leq m_3(n)$ for every n. It was proved by Komlós, Sulyok, and Szemerédi [11] in a more general setting that there exists a constant $c > 0$ such that $m_3'(n) \geq cm_3(n)$. Thus, Theorem 2 immediately follows from well known estimates on $m_3(n)$, due to Behrend [2], Heath-Brown [9], and Szemerédi [14].

Note that the same argument can be applied in higher dimensions.

3 Proof of Theorem 2

First we establish the upper bound, by adapting the arguments in [5]. Assume, for the sake of simplicity, that $n = \lfloor \frac{2^{d(d-2)}}{d} \rfloor$ for some natural number $d \geq 4$. Consider the set L of all lattice points $(x_1, \ldots, x_d) \in \mathbf{R^d}$ with integer coordinates $0 \leq x_i < 2^d$. The number of distinct distances determined by L is at most $d(2^d)^2$, because there are at most that many numbers of the form $(\sum_{i=1}^{d}(x_i - x_i')^2)^{1/2}$, where $0 \leq x_i, x_i' < 2^d$. In particular, there is a sphere around the origin which contains at least

$$\frac{|L|}{d(2^d)^2} = \frac{(2^d)^d}{d(2^d)^2} \geq \lfloor \frac{2^{d(d-2)}}{d} \rfloor = n$$

elements of L. Let P denote the set of these points.

Let $M(P)$ denote the set of midpoints of all segments determined by P. Clearly, we have $|M(P)| = |P+P|$, where $P+P = \{\, p_1+p_2 \mid p_1, p_2 \in P \,\}$. Observe that every element of $P+P$ is a vector $(x_1, \ldots, x_d) \in \mathbf{R^d}$ with integer coordinates $0 \leq x_i < 2^{d+1}$, hence

$$|M(P)| = |P+P| \leq (2^{d+1})^d < n2^{8\sqrt{\log n}}.$$

Fix a 2-dimensional plane Π in $\mathbf{R^d}$, and for any $p \in P$ let p' denote the orthogonal projection of p into Π. Evidently, we can choose Π so as to meet the following two conditions: (i) the projections of no two elements of P coincide, (ii) no 3 elements of P' are collinear. In view of the fact that $p_1 + p_2 = p_3 + p_4$ implies $|p_1' + p_2'| = |p_3' + p_4'|$, we have that the number of distinct midpoints of all segments determined by P' satisfies

$$|M(P')| = |P' + P'| \leq |P+P| < n2^{8\sqrt{\log n}},$$

as required. This argument easily extends to the general case when n can take any positive integer value.

We prove the second part of Theorem 2 by contradiction. Assume that for infinitely many values of n there are n-element point sets P_n with no 3 collinear points in the plane such that the the number of midpoints of all segments spanned by P_n satisfies $|M(P_n)| = |P_n + P_n| < Cn$, for an absolute constant C.

We need the following well known result of Freiman [6]: For any integer C, there exists C' with the property that any n-element set P_n

in the plane with $|P_n + P_n| < Cn$ can be covered by the projection of a lattice of dimension C and size $C'n$. That is,

$$P_n \subseteq \{v_0 + m_1 v_1 + \cdots + m_C v_C \mid 1 \le m_i \le n_i\},$$

for suitable vectors $v_i \in \mathbf{R^2}$ and natural numbers n_i satisfying $\prod_{i=1}^{C} n_i \le C'n$. (See Ruzsa [13] for a simple proof.)

Without loss of generality assume that $n_1 \ge n^{1/C}$. Obviously, we can fix some values $\bar{m}_2, \ldots, \bar{m}_C$ so that

$$v_0 + m_1 v_1 + \bar{m}_2 v_2 + \cdots + \bar{m}_C v_C \in P_n$$

for at least

$$\frac{n}{n_2 n_3 \cdots n_C} \ge \frac{n_1}{C'} \ge \frac{n^{1/C}}{C'}$$

different integers m_1. However, the corresponding points of P_n are all on a line, contradicting our assumption.

4 Related problems

4.1. It was noticed by Cockayne and Hedetniemi [3] that the problem of placing queens on the diagonal of an $n \times n$ chessboard so as to cover all squares is equivalent to the problem of finding a midpoint-free set of integers up to $n/2$, i.e., one containing no 3-term arithmetic progression.

4.2. Erdős raised the following problem related to Theorem 1. Determine the largest integer $\alpha(n)$ such that every set of n points in the plane, no four on a line, has an $\alpha(n)$-element subset with no collinear triples. The best known bounds, due to Füredi [7], leave plenty of room for improvement:

$$\Omega(\sqrt{n \log n}) \le \alpha(n) \le o(n).$$

4.3. Erdős, Fishburn, and Füredi [4] studied the following question, strongly related to Theorem 2. Given a set P of n points in *convex position* in the plane, let $M(P)$ denote the set of midpoints of its $\binom{n}{2}$ sides and diagonals. How small can the cardinality $\mu_c(n)$ of M be for fixed n? One might guess that the answer is $(0.5 - o(1))n^2$. However, it was shown in [4] that this minimum is somewhere between $0.40\,n^2$ and $0.45\,n^2$. In fact, we have

$$\binom{n}{2} - \lfloor \frac{n(n+1)(1-e^{-1/2})}{4} \rfloor \leq \mu_c(n) \leq \binom{n}{2} - \lfloor \frac{n^2-2n+12}{20} \rfloor,$$

for all $n \geq 3$. The upper bound follows from the fact that the number of multiple midpoints can be as large as $\lfloor (n^2-2n+12)/20 \rfloor$.

Woodall [15] solved a similar problem of R. Hall, concerning the minimum number of midpoints induced by an n-element subset of the vertex set of a d-dimensional cube ($n \leq 2^d$).

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