



Census 2000

by Gary J. Gates

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Census 2000 revealed that there were 594,391 same-sex "unmarried partner" couples in the United States (301,026 male couples and 293,365 female couples), now commonly understood to refer to gay male and lesbian couples. These couples are present in 99.3 percent of all U.S. counties.

Importance of the Census

Census 2000 data on same-sex partners represent the largest and most comprehensive source of data on gay and lesbian couples living in the United States. Census 2000 is also the only data source available to study characteristics of gay and lesbian families at the national, state, city, and even neighborhood level.

Of all government-data collection processes, none have the weight of the decennial census. Administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, the census is conducted for the constitutionally mandated purpose of apportioning congressional seats among the 50 states. In addition to its mandated purpose, the decennial census is also used to determine the appropriate distribution of government funding, draw state legislative districts, evaluate the success of programs, identify populations in need of services, and a host of other functions.

Key Findings

Key findings from Census 2000 regarding same-sex couples include the following.

Among the 50 states, Vermont has the highest concentration of same-sex couples (nearly 1 percent of all households), followed by California, Washington, Massachusetts, and Oregon.

Among metropolitan areas, San Francisco has the highest concentration of same-sex couples (1.75 percent of all households), followed by Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz, California, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Oakland, California.

Among smaller towns, Provincetown, Massachusetts has the highest concentration (12.8 percent of all households), followed by Guerneville, California, Wilton Manors, Florida, West Hollywood and Palm Springs, California.

Nearly a quarter of same-sex couples are raising children, and these families live in 96 percent of U.S. counties. Same-sex couples are most likely to have children in Mississippi (41 percent are raising children) and San Antonio, Texas (36 percent).

More than one in ten same-sex couples includes a senior aged 65 or older.

Sumter, South Carolina has the highest portion of African-American same-sex couples (2.6 per 1,000 households); and McAllen, Texas has the highest proportion of Hispanic same-sex couples (5.3 per 1,000

households).

Data Collection

To gather the data in Census 2000, the Census Bureau sent each housing unit in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico a census questionnaire with six basic questions about each person in the household: name, sex, age, relationship to the householder, Hispanic origin, and race. The householder (the person filling out the census form) was also asked whether the housing unit was rented or owned.

These seven questions comprise what is commonly called the census "short form." One in six U.S. households also received a "long form" with detailed questions about housing, employment, income, and military service.

Identifying Same-Sex Couples

The census does not ask questions about sexual orientation, sexual behavior, or sexual attraction, three common ways used to identify gay men and lesbians in surveys. Rather, census forms include a number of relationship categories to define how individuals in a household are related to the householder. These fall into two broad categories: related persons (including husband/wife, son/daughter, brother/sister, and so on), and unrelated persons.

Since 1990, the Census Bureau has included an "unmarried partner" category to describe an unrelated household member's relationship to the householder. If the householder designates another adult of the same sex as his or her unmarried partner, the household counts as a same-sex unmarried partner household. Research comparing 1990 Census data on same-sex unmarried partners and data from other surveys provides strong evidence that same-sex unmarried partners counted by the census are by and large gay male and lesbian couples.

It is possible that a gay or lesbian couple could consider themselves "married," based on their own interpretation of that social construct, even though at the time the census was collected, no state government officially recognized marital unions between two people of the same sex.

The federal Defense of Marriage Act prohibits the Census Bureau from reporting marriage statistics that include anything other than opposite-sex couples. However, in post-collection data editing procedures used in Census 2000, the "husband/wife" relationship designation was changed to an "unmarried partner" relationship when the couple was of the same sex. The couple was then officially counted as a same-sex unmarried partner couple. In short, same-sex couples who considered themselves married are included in the 2000 counts of same-sex unmarried partners.

Undercount of Same-sex Unmarried Partners

Any analysis of Census 2000's count of same-sex unmarried partners must consider the issue of a likely undercount. There are several potential reasons for an undercount. Concerns about the confidentiality of their responses may have led many gay male and lesbian couples to indicate a status that would not provide evidence of the true nature of their relationship. Other couples may have felt that neither "unmarried partner" nor "husband/wife" accurately describes their relationship. A study of the undercount of same-sex unmarried partners in Census 2000 indicates that these were the two most common reasons that gay male and lesbian couples chose not to designate themselves as unmarried partners.

Estimates of the size of the undercount vary. Gates and Ost suggest that the true size of the coupled gay and lesbian population is likely 25 percent higher than Census 2000 figures and could be as much as 50 percent higher.

Other Difficulties with Census Counts of Same-sex Unmarried Partners

While the existence of an undercount is quite likely, an equally relevant issue is the possibility that some portion of the same-sex unmarried partner couples might be incorrectly designated as such due to a miscoding of either the "unmarried partner" relationship status or the sex of one of the partners. There are a number of ways a household could be classified in the census data as a same-sex unmarried partner household even though it is not headed by a gay male or lesbian couple.

One source of measurement error among the same-sex unmarried partner data from Census 2000 is likely a result of sex miscoding errors among heterosexual couples. It can be assumed that some very small fraction of the population makes an error when completing the census form and possibly miscodes a variety of responses, including the sex of the householder or the householder's "husband/wife" or "unmarried partner." Under Census 2000 editing procedures, all these miscoded couples would be included in the counts of same-sex unmarried partners.

Because the ratio between married couples and same-sex couples is so large (roughly 90 to 1), even a small fraction of sex miscoding among married couples adds a sizable fraction of heterosexual married couples to the same-sex unmarried-partner population, possibly distorting some demographic characteristics, particularly child rearing.

Mistakes in the designation of an unmarried partner could also cause errors. One form of error occurs when the person filling out the census form (the householder) does not have a spouse or unmarried partner in the household, but does have a child or other adult in the household living with an unmarried partner. For example, if a female householder classifies the female unmarried partner of her son as an "unmarried partner," then this household would be counted as a female same-sex unmarried partner, or lesbian, household.

While analysis of 1990 Census data suggests that this type of error has negligible effects on the quality of the data at a national level, it could be more common in analyses of certain communities where extended families are more likely to be living in the home, and households are larger. For example, Hispanic and Native American populations are more likely to have extended families living in the home. Communities with large Hispanic and Native American populations are therefore more susceptible to this type of error because there are proportionally more households where the error could occur.

Another form of measurement error could be language-based. Confusion may result when respondents fill out a census form not written in their native language or if the census enumerator translations of terms such as "unmarried partner" and "roommate" in other languages, particularly Spanish, do not have the same meanings as the English version. All households in the 50 states and the District of Columbia received English language forms, regardless of the predominant language spoken in either the household or the neighborhood. However, if a census form was not returned, most likely an enumerator who speaks local native languages would have visited the house and assisted the householder in filling out an English-language form.

Who Counts in the Census?

Many members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community were left out of the census. The largest omission is single gay men and lesbians, who form a majority of the glbtq community. Likely more than half of all gay and lesbian individuals in the United States are not included in census data counting only same-sex couples. Bisexual and transgender individuals will sporadically appear in the data, but cannot be identified as such since there was no census question about sexual orientation or gender identity.

Conclusion

Despite these problems of undercounting and measurement errors, Census 2000 data on same-sex partners represent the most comprehensive source of data on gay and lesbian couples living in the United States. Lobbyists from gay/lesbian civil rights groups regularly use this information to attempt to convince congressional representatives that gay and lesbian people live, and most likely vote, in their districts. The Congressional Budget Office recently used the figures to assess the fiscal impact of same-sex marriage on the U.S. budget.

These data provide the first empirical evidence that gay and lesbian people live virtually everywhere in the United States and help to dispel stereotypes by presenting a more accurate picture of gay and lesbian families.

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About the Author

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