



Demographics

by Gary J. Gates

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Assessing the demographic characteristics of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender population can be a daunting challenge, in part because sexual orientation and gender identification are not easily measured constructs, data are relatively rare, and the glbtq population can be reluctant to identify themselves as such in surveys. Defining gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals by reported sexual attraction, behavior, or identification can yield different groups of people with different characteristics.

Further, few data sources that can be generalized to the population include questions about sexual orientation, behavior, or attraction; and even fewer ask questions about gender identification.

While most evidence suggests that the stigmatization of homosexual behavior in the United States and throughout the world is being reduced, it is still an important factor in the lives of glbtq people and for glbtq research. As a result, many glbtq individuals are reluctant to reveal information about their sexual orientation or gender identity to surveyors. Hence, undercounting and potential biases are persistent problems in data collection.

For all of these reasons, most demographic information about the glbtq population comes with a variety of caveats regarding the nature of the sample used to derive the information.

National U.S. Data Sources Used to Study the Gay and Lesbian Population

The decennial census represents perhaps the most widely used data source for describing both the geographic and demographic characteristics of the gay and lesbian population in the United States. The addition in the 1990 census of a category called "unmarried partner" to the household roster on the census allows for the identification of same-sex couples. Since census forms do not ask about sexual orientation, attraction, or behavior, the analyses from that data source are limited to same-sex couples.

Several other national surveys include ways of identifying single gay men and lesbians as well as bisexuals. These surveys tend to have relatively small sample sizes, especially when compared to census data. The General Social Survey (GSS) is a national survey of adults (ages 18 and above) conducted every two years and includes questions about same-sex sexual behavior. The National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSL), fielded in 1992 only, included questions on sexual behavior, attraction, and identification, but was limited to the population ages 18-59.

The 2002/2003 round of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) surveys men and women ages 18-44 and includes questions about sexual orientation. The National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a study of adolescents, also includes questions about sexual orientation.

Estimating the Size of the Gay and Lesbian Population

Estimating the size of the gay and lesbian population can provoke much debate. The legendary 10 percent

figure, derived from Alfred Kinsey's path-breaking *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) is likely not terribly accurate. The figure comes from a finding that ten percent of the males in the Kinsey data were more or less exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55. This is not the same as saying that 10 percent of adults identify as gay men or lesbians.

Voter exit polls in the United States found that between 4 and 5 percent of voters in the last five U.S. national elections identified as gay or lesbian. While voters may constitute a large sample of the U.S. population, they are still not representative of the population at large.

The NHSLs found that 1.4 percent of women and 2.8 percent of men thought of themselves as homosexual or bisexual, while more than 4 percent of women and more than 6 percent of men report a sexual attraction to people of the same sex. Another analysis that combines data from the NHSLs and several waves of the GSS finds that 3.6 percent of women and nearly 5 percent of men report having had sexual contact with a partner of the same sex since they were age 18. A national survey in Canada (2003) found that 1.9 percent of men and 1.6 percent of women reported being gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Where Do Gay People Live?

Analyses of census data provided the first empirical evidence that gay men and lesbians live virtually everywhere in the United States. Census 2000 counts revealed that 99.3 percent of U.S. counties included at least one of the 594,391 same-sex couples counted.

Additional census findings include the following.

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

Among large metropolitan areas (population above 500,000), San Francisco, California had the highest concentration of same-sex couples (1.75 percent of all households), followed by Oakland, California, Seattle, Washington, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and Austin, Texas.

Among medium sized metropolitan areas (population 200,000-500,000), Santa Rosa, California had the highest concentration of same-sex couples (1.2 percent of all households), followed by Santa Cruz, California, Portland, Maine, Madison, Wisconsin, and Asheville, North Carolina.

Among small metropolitan areas (population less than 200,000), Santa Fe, New Mexico had the highest concentration of same-sex couples (1.1 percent of all households), followed by Burlington, Vermont, Bloomington, Indiana, Iowa City, Iowa, and Barnstable-Yarmouth, Massachusetts.

Among smaller towns, Provincetown, Massachusetts had the highest concentration of same-sex couples (12.8 percent of all households), followed by Guerneville, California, Wilton Manors, Florida, and two other California cities: West Hollywood and Palm Springs.

The top five neighborhoods (defined as zip codes) ranked by the concentration of same-sex couples among all households included Provincetown, the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco, Guerneville, the Twin Peaks neighborhood in San Francisco, and West Hollywood.

Location patterns for male and female couples differed. While California, Nevada, Florida, New York, and Georgia topped the list for states with the highest concentration of male couples, the top five states for female couples were Vermont, New Mexico, Oregon, Massachusetts, and California. Among all metropolitan areas, the top five for male couples were San Francisco, Fort Lauderdale, Santa Rosa, Seattle, and New York. The top five metropolitan areas for female couples were Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Santa Fe, San Francisco, and Oakland.

Location Patterns by Race/Ethnicity

More than a quarter of same-sex couples in the U.S. included a racial or ethnic minority. In general, gay or lesbian racial/ethnic minorities were more likely to cluster in areas with large numbers of similar racial/ethnic minorities than in places with high concentration of other gay male and lesbian couples.

States with the highest concentrations of African-American same-sex couples were Mississippi (1.68 per 1,000 households), Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, and Maryland. Among metropolitan areas, the top five in this category were Sumter, South Carolina (2.62 per 1,000 households), Albany, Georgia, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and Florence, South Carolina.

States with the highest concentrations of Hispanic same-sex couples were New Mexico (2.28 per 1,000 households), California, Texas, Arizona, and Nevada. Four of the five top metropolitan areas in this ranking were in Texas: McAllen (5.32 per 1,000 households), Laredo, and Brownsville ranked as the top three with El Paso at fifth. Miami, Florida ranked fourth.

Gay and Lesbian Families with Children

According to Census 2000, nearly a quarter of same-sex couples in the U.S. were raising children, and these families lived in 96 percent of U.S. counties. Approximately one in five male couples were raising a child under age 18 compared to one in three female couples. There were at least 250,000 children being raised by more than 150,000 same-sex couples in the U.S.

Same-sex couples were most likely to have children in Mississippi (41 percent are raising children), followed by South Dakota, Alaska, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Among large metropolitan areas (population above 1 million), same-sex couples were most likely to have children in San Antonio, Texas (36 percent), Bergen-Passaic, New Jersey, Memphis, Tennessee, Houston, and Fort Worth, Texas.

Gay and Lesbian Seniors

Nearly 20 percent of coupled gay men and lesbians in the U.S. were at least 55 years old. The states with the highest proportion of coupled gay and lesbian seniors among adults were Vermont (1.63 per 1,000 adults), Florida, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Maine. Among metropolitan areas, the top five in this ranking were Barnstable-Yarmouth, Massachusetts (3.12 per 1,000 adults), Santa Rosa and San Francisco, California, Sarasota-Bradenton, Florida, and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Education and Income

One of the most consistent findings from demographic studies of gay men and lesbians has to do with education and income. Nearly all studies (both in the U.S. and internationally) find that gay men and lesbians have higher education levels than other men and women. Most studies also find that gay men earn less than other men and lesbians earn more than other women, even when differences in age, education, and occupation are taken into account.

One study (using data primarily from the 1990s) found that the wages of gay men were between 14 and 16 percent below the wages of other men, while the wages of lesbians were 20 to 34 percent higher than the wages of other women. It should be noted that lesbian wages were on average still lower than the wages of gay men. The same study found that gay men and lesbians had higher education levels than their heterosexual counterparts. Both gay men and lesbians had on average 14.3 years of education, compared to 13.9 years for heterosexual men and women. Findings from census data on same-sex couples show similar patterns.

Gay Men and Lesbians in the Military

There are an estimated one million gay and lesbian veterans in the U.S. Coupled gay men are less likely than other men to serve in the military, while partnered lesbians are more than five times as likely as other women to report ever having served in the armed forces.

Conclusion

The myriad policy debates about gay and lesbian rights occurring in voting booths, courts, and legislative bodies around the world most often take place with limited information about the population under debate. In addition to the United States, census data collection efforts in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and several European countries are now including ways to count same-sex couples. As more countries recognize marriage rights for these couples, additional data will likely become available.

An increasing number of surveys are also asking questions about sexual orientation and gender identification. These data collection efforts hold the promise of providing a more accurate demographic picture of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

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