

Danielle MacCartney, *Public Policy Fellow*
M.V. Lee Badgett, *Research Director*
Gary J. Gates, *Senior Policy Fellow*

United States Decennial Census, 2000

The primary data source for estimates about gay and lesbian households in the United States for the Census Snapshots published by the Williams Institute is the United States 2000 Decennial Census. Unless otherwise noted, we use the 5 percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) to determine the characteristics of same-sex unmarried partner households. The PUMS is a random sample of responses to the census long-form, which contains detailed information about all members of the household.

Identifying same-sex unmarried partners

The census household roster includes a number of relationship categories to define how individuals in a household are related to the householder (the person filling out the form). These fall into two broad categories: related persons (e.g., husband/wife, son/daughter, brother/sister), and unrelated persons (e.g., unmarried partner, housemate/roommate, roomer/boarder, and other nonrelative). 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” or “husband/wife”, the Census counts the household as a same-sex unmarried partner household. These same-sex couples are commonly understood to be primarily gay and lesbian couples (Black et al. 2000), even though the census does not ask any questions about sexual orientation, sexual behavior, or sexual attraction—three common ways used to identify gay men and lesbians in surveys.

Measurement issues

Several measurement issues associated with the same-sex unmarried partner data could affect estimates describing the gay and lesbian population of the United States.

First, to the extent that the census sample can be used to derive characteristics of gay and lesbian people, it is important to note that the sample is only representative of same-sex couples. Their characteristics may differ from those of single gay men and lesbians. For example, Carpenter and Gates (2007) find that white and highly educated gay men and lesbians are more likely to be partnered.

Second, concerns about confidentiality may lead some same-sex couples to indicate a status that would not provide evidence of the true nature of their relationship. Other couples may believe that “unmarried partner” or “husband/wife” does not accurately describe their relationship or household structure. A study of undercount issues relating to same-sex unmarried partners in Census 2000 indicates that these were the two most common reasons that gay and lesbian couples chose not to designate themselves as unmarried partners (Badgett and Rogers 2003). It seems reasonable to believe that the census tends to capture same-sex couples who are more willing to

acknowledge their relationship and are potentially more “out” about their sexual orientation.

These reporting issues suggest that estimates of the number of same-sex unmarried partner couples derived from the census likely represent a lower bound.

Beyond possible errors related to reporting a same-sex partner, a measurement error issue specific to same-sex unmarried partners identified in Census 2000 creates an additional concern. In the 1990 Census, a household record that included a same-sex “husband/wife” was edited such that, in most cases, the sex of the husband or wife was changed and the couple became a different-sex married couple in publicly released data (Black et al., 2000). This decision is reasonable if most of the same-sex husbands and wives were a result of the respondent checking the wrong sex for either him- or herself or his or her spouse. In Census 2000, officials decided that some same-sex couples may consider themselves married, regardless of legal recognition. As a result, these records were altered such that the same-sex “husband/wife” was recoded as an “unmarried partner.”

This process inadvertently creates a measurement error issue. Some very small fraction of different-sex couples likely make an error when completing the census form and miscode the sex of one of the partners. Under Census 2000 editing procedures, all of these miscoded couples would be included in the counts of same-sex unmarried partners. Because the ratio between different-sex married couples and same-sex couples is so large (roughly 90 to 1), even a small fraction of sex miscoding among different-sex married couples adds a sizable fraction of them to the same-sex unmarried-partner population, possibly distorting some demographic characteristics.

Black et al. (2006) propose a method for at least partially correcting the problem. Same-sex unmarried partner households where one member of the couple was identified as “husband/wife” are the “at-risk” group for this form of measurement error. Census data provide no simple way to identify this group, since the editing is not considered the kind of “allocation” that is noted in the computer record for each

person or household. However, one way to isolate same-sex “spouses” is to consider the marital status variable allocation flag (a variable indicating that the original response to the marital status question had been altered by the Census Bureau). Census Bureau officials confirm that their editing procedures altered the marital status of any unmarried partners who said they were “currently married.” Changes in marital status occurred after editing all of the same-sex “husbands” and “wives” into the “unmarried partner” category. A large portion of the same-sex unmarried partners who had their marital status allocated likely originally responded that they were “currently married” given that one of the partners was a “husband/wife,” including those married different-sex couples who made a mistake in reporting the sex of one of the spouses. Same-sex partners who have not had their marital status variable allocated are likely free of significant measurement error.

Same-sex couples used in Williams Institute Census Snapshots

In order to get the most accurate estimates of the characteristics of gay and lesbian couples, we limit the sample of same-sex unmarried partners to those where both partners did not have his or her marital status allocated. In doing so, we essentially limit the same-sex couples to only those who originally identified a partner as an “unmarried partner.” Same-sex couples who identified themselves as being married in some way are regrettably excluded from our analyses, since at least some are likely to be different-sex couples. It is important to note that actual same-sex couples who consider themselves to be married may differ demographically from those who call themselves “unmarried partners”, so our findings about same-sex couples may be “biased” in the sense that they leave out a distinctive group of same-sex couples. However, we believe that the bias resulting from including miscoded different-sex married couples in the sample is of greater concern.

References

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About the Authors

Danielle MacCartney

Danielle MacCartney earned her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, Irvine. Her current research interests include wage and labor market differences by race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, focusing on occupational characteristics such as occupational percent female and occupational status.

M.V. Lee Badgett is the Research Director at The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, and an associate professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she is also on the faculty of the Center for Public Policy and Administration. She studies family policy and employment discrimination related to sexual orientation.

Gary J. Gates is a Senior Research Fellow at The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. He studies the demographic and economic characteristics of the lesbian and gay population.

For more information, contact:
The Williams Institute
UCLA School of Law
Box 951476
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1476
T (310)267-4382
F (310)825-7270
williamsinstitute@law.ucla.edu
www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute