Diversity Among Same-Sex Couples and Their Children

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Current controversies about marriage and parenting rights for lesbians and gay men provide a good example of why it is essential to take account of race and class in discussions of sexuality and family life, and why it is also necessary to integrate race and class into our discussion of issues such as marriage for same-sex couples. The success of television shows such as Will and Grace and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy contribute to an increasingly visible role for lesbians and gay men in American news media and in popular culture. Unfortunately, popular images rarely display the diversity of the lesbian and gay community in the United States, focusing disproportionately on relatively wealthy, white, and urban gay men. A recent analysis of American television broadcast media by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2007) found that the gay community was commonly portrayed as both white and male. But the real life world of the lesbian and gay community, especially those who are raising children, is often far removed from trendy lofts, expensive cocktails, and designer labels. To cite a few examples:

- Mississippi, not California, is the state where same-sex couples are most likely to be raising children.
- The median household income of same-sex couples with children is substantially lower than that of different-sex married couples with children.
- More than half of the children being raised by same-sex couples are non-white.

This essay explores the diversity of same-sex couples and their families, focusing primarily on analyses of data from the 2000 United States Census. In doing so, I offer a demographic portrait of lesbian and gay couples and their families that challenges stereotypes and myths about this understudied population.

CHILD REARING AMONG LESBIANS AND GAY MEN

Perhaps the most intriguing finding from Census 2000 was that more than one in five same-sex couples were raising children—which translates into more than 250,000 children being raised by openly gay and lesbian couples (Gates and Ost, 2004). Evidence from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) demonstrates that these couples represent only the tip of the lesbian and gay child-rearing iceberg. Not only does the Census understate the actual number of same-sex couples currently raising children, but it also does not take into account the growing desire and ability of gays and lesbians, and gay men, four in ten of whom want to have children with a non-lesbian or non-gay woman, or in some cases, with a third of lesbians and gay men. From this group, add several more who want them as part of a couple.

So where are all these children? As we have mentioned, more than 70 percent of same-sex couples, or a portion of the 70 percent of same-sex couples, do not have children. A study of the product of reproduction suggests that a large portion of lesbians and gay men will not be raising children.

Contrary to most theories, ethnicity is one of the most important factors in determining whether a gay or lesbian parent is likely to be a mother or father or son or daughter. In general, gay and lesbian parents are more likely to be white and non-Hispanic, and less likely to be African American or Hispanic. In fact, the percentage of children who are African American or Hispanic is lower among same-sex parents than among opposite-sex parents.

Same-sex couples more often fall into the middle and upper-middle, middle-class, urban, sophisticated pockets of society.
Lesbians and gay men provide an opportunity to look at the different family structures and the role of the family in the lives of people who identify as LGBT. This chapter explores how families are defined and what they mean to LGBT people, their families, and society.

Lesbians

- Want to have a child: 41%
- Given birth: 35%
- Couples raising children: 33%

Gay Men

- Want to have a child: 50%
- Fathered a child: 16%
- Couples raising children: 20%

Figure 28.1

ability of gays and lesbians to have children in the future (Figure 28.1). Among childless lesbians and gay men, four in ten lesbians and fully half of gay men want to have a child. Furthermore, a third of lesbians and one in six gay men already have children, even if they are not presently raising them as part of a couple (Macomber, Badgett, Gates, and Chambers, 2007).

So where are all of these children coming from? Among children under age 18 living with same-sex couples, only 7 percent are adopted and 1.5 percent are foster children. The vast majority, more than 70 percent, are either the "natural born" child or a "step-child" of the householder. An additional 5 percent are grandchildren, with another 5 percent other relatives such as siblings and cousins, and 10 percent are "non-relatives" (at least in relation to the householder). Clearly, a portion of the 70 percent of children who are "natural born" or "step-children" are likely the product of reproductive technologies like artificial insemination or surrogacy. Unfortunately, we have no way of estimating how common this practice is among same-sex couples or lesbian and gay people in general. However, given the expenses associated with these procedures and evidence regarding the economic disadvantage of many of these couples discussed below, it seems likely that a large portion of these children are the product of a prior heterosexual relationship. Not surprisingly, men and women in same-sex couples who were previously married are nearly twice as likely as their never-married counterparts to have a child under 18 in the home (Figure 28.2).

Contrary to most television images of same-sex couples raising children, diversity by race and ethnicity is one of the more striking demographic characteristics of such couples. African-American and Latina women in same-sex couples are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to be raising a child. And gay African-American men and Latinos are three times as likely to be raising children as are gay white men. Consistent with this finding, 40 percent of individuals in same-sex couples raising children are non-white. And more than half of the children of same-sex couples are non-white.

Same-sex couples raising children defy the stereotype of lesbian and gay people as wealthy, urban, sophisticates perhaps more than any segment of the lesbian and gay community. Across all
racial and ethnic groups, same-sex couples raising children have lower median household incomes than do married couples raising children. The median household income of African-Americans in a same-sex couple raising children is more than 20 percent lower than that of their married counterparts. For Whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders, the comparable difference is about 10 percent (Sears and Gates, 2005). Clearly, same-sex couples raising children are not particularly wealthy (Figure 28.3).

They also do not tend to live in areas known as gay enclaves. More than four in ten same-sex couples in Mississippi are raising children, making it the state where same-sex couples are most likely to have a child. Mississippi is followed by South Dakota, Alaska, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Among similar percent of same-sex couples (New Jersey), Memphis,

CHANGES IN THE FUTURE
As more gay men and lesbians appear willing to "come out," and the nature of their relationships, where gays and lesbians have married the Census used the option of choosing the groups who identified themselves as gay. In 2000, the Census record had risen to more than the Survey show that states that gay and lesbian couples since the Census 2000, the SARS and the perception that lesbians and gay men (Lewin and Ost, 2004). As the positive in the South, more gay men and lesbians residents in the South.

Changes in the location of 93 percent of self-identified, 80 percent of all Americans rate at which all Americans (rising to 81 percent), the U.S. Census Bureau defines people per square mile. In urban areas compared to 90 percent of all American heterosexual couples.

Child-rearing rates among heterosexual and same-sex and 20 percent of same-sex couples increased to nearly 20 percent.

The racial and ethnic increasing similarity between 20 percent of Americans identified as gay women who identified themselves the percentage of American couples, the figure rose more than a demographic convergence.

Figure 28.2 Child under age 18 in the home

Figure 28.3 Median Household Income: Families raising children under age 18
Louisiana. Among similarly ranking metropolitan areas, San Antonio, Texas, where more than 36 percent of same-sex couples are raising children, tops the list. The top five include Bergen-Passaic (New Jersey), Memphis, Houston, and Fort Worth (Gates and Ost, 2004).

CHANGES IN THE FUTURE

As more gay men and lesbians feel free to come out about their identity and relationships, we are likely to see the similarities between gay and lesbian and heterosexual families become even greater. Polling from the last few decades demonstrates a marked change in American attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. In 1988, a Gallup poll found that only 33 percent of Americans thought that homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal. By 2007, that figure had increased to 59 percent. As the social stigma surrounding lesbians and gay men declines, more of them appear willing to "come out" on surveys and provide information about their sexual orientation and the nature of their relationships, and that process is now spreading beyond the urban areas where gays and lesbians historically felt freer to reveal their sexual orientation. In 1990, the first year that the Census used the "unmarried partner" category, there were more than 290,000 individuals who identified themselves as part of a same-sex couple in the United States (Smith and Gates, 2001). In 2000, the Census recorded nearly 1.2 million individuals in same-sex couples. By 2005, the figure had risen to more than 1.5 million (Gates, 2007). Analyses of the 2005 American Community Survey show that states throughout the Midwest have experienced the largest increases in same-sex couples since the Census 2000 (Gates, 2007). This offers further evidence that we need to alter our perception that lesbians and gay men are concentrated in the coastal regions of the country (Gates and Ost, 2004). As the proverbial closet doors open wider in areas such as the Midwest and the South, more gay men and lesbians will feel free to move to these regions and more long-term gay and lesbian residents in those regions will feel free to come out.

Changes in the location preferences of same-sex couples demonstrate this pattern. In 1990, 93 percent of self-identified same-sex couples were located in a metropolitan area, compared to just 80 percent of all American households. By 2000, this demographic gap had narrowed. While the rate at which all American households were located in a metropolitan area had not changed much (rising to 81 percent), the comparable figure for same-sex couples had dropped to 86 percent. The U.S. Census Bureau defines "urban clusters" as areas with population densities that exceed 1,000 people per square mile. In 1990, about 75 percent of all American households lived in these urban areas compared to 90 percent same-sex couples. By 2000, that gap too had narrowed, with 80 percent of all American households living in urban clusters compared to 84 percent of same-sex couples.

Child-rearing rates among same-sex couples are also on the rise, creating more convergence among heterosexual and same-sex couples. In 1990, only about 5 percent of same-sex male couples and 20 percent of same-sex female couples were raising children. By 2000, child-rearing rates had increased to nearly 20 percent of male couples and a third of female couples.

The racial and ethnic composition of same-sex couples provides a third example of the increasing similarity between the characteristics of same-sex and heterosexual couples. In 1990, 20 percent of Americans identified as non-white. In that same year, only 13 percent of men and women who identified themselves as being in a same-sex couple were non-white. By Census 2000, the percentage of Americans who were non-white had risen to 30 percent. Among those in same-sex couples, the figure rose more dramatically to nearly a quarter who were non-white. The data suggest a demographic convergence of sorts. As lesbians and gay men in minority communities feel
more comfortable in coming out, the "visible" gay community looks increasingly like the broader American population. Analyses of Census data provide clear evidence of a gay and lesbian community reflecting the diversity of America in family form, socio-economic status, and race and ethnicity.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Census data offer a portrait of lesbian and gay families that challenges monolithic and stereotyped images of them as wealthy, white, childless, and urban—an image that likely never reflected the truth about this diverse population. The demographic diversity of the lesbian and gay community has bearing on policy debates regarding marriage and adoption rights. Among other things, marriage provides legal and economic protections that cannot be completely replicated through non-marital legal contracts. For example, federal social security survival benefits are not awarded to same-sex partners nor can these partners file wrongful death lawsuits in states that do not recognize their relationships. These rights, so important to economic security in times of crisis like the death of a spouse, would certainly be even more important to lower-income same-sex couples.

Census analyses showing economic disadvantages among same-sex couples raising children are also cogent to these debates. Marriage and legal adoption provide myriad legal and economic protections specifically for parents and their children. In the absence of marriage or adoption, some partners in same-sex couples have no legal standing in relation to their children. Among other problems, this lack of standing could impact their ability to cover their children on employee healthcare plans and create difficulties in an emergency medical situation where the legal parent is not available to authorize appropriate care. Again, among lower-income lesbian and gay families, the rights and protections afforded by marriage and legal adoption can be even more critical.

Marriage and adoption rights for lesbians and gay men may be seen as luxuries by some members of the public, something that an affluent community wants as a whim or an abstract statement of principle. But these rights can be absolutely vital to lower-income people and their families, who, Census data confirm, comprise a large portion of the lesbian and gay community. The struggle for equal rights for sexual minorities should not be understood as merely a struggle among elites; it should be a key part of larger efforts promoting racial and social justice.

NOTES

1. Identification of same-sex couples in the 2000 U.S. Decennial Census relies on information provided about the nature of the relationship between the person who filled out the Census form and his or her relationship to other members of the household. If this person describes another adult of the same sex as his or her "unmarried partner" or "husband/wife," the couple counts as a same-sex unmarried partner household (see Gates and Ost, 2004 for a detailed explanation of counting same-sex couples). Because only couples are counted, the Census data do not capture single gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals nor do they offer a way to separately identify bisexuals or transgender individuals.

2. The Census most likely undercounts the population of same-sex couples. Concerns about revealing the nature of their relationships to the federal government may lead many same-sex couples not to use categories like "unmarried partner" or "husband/wife" to describe their partnerships. In addition, some couples may believe that "unmarried partner" or "husband/wife" does not accurately describe their relationship.

3. An estimated 65,500 adopted children and 14,000 foster children are living with a lesbian and gay parent, both single and partnered (Macomber, Badgett, Gates, and Chambers, 2007).


5. Some caution should be noted in comparing same-sex couples identified in the 1990 and 2000 Census enumerations. The 2000 Census includes couples where one same-sex partner was identified as the "husband," "wife," or "unmarried partner" of the other partner. The 1990 counts only include couples where a same-sex partner is identified as an "unmarried partner." Same-sex spouses were not included in the 1990 counts.

REFERENCES
