

A Demographic Profile of New Jersey's Gay and Lesbian Families

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Note: This report was modified from its original form on September 16, 2004. The revised version clarifies the estimate of the number of children being raised by same-sex couples in New Jersey with an assessment of the impact of a measurement error issue that could lead to inflated estimates in official Census Bureau figures.

Introduction

While same-sex marriage debate has focused heavily on Massachusetts, New Jersey appears to be the next battleground in this controversial debate. In June 2002, seven couples filed a lawsuit in the state of New Jersey challenging that state's prohibition against legal recognition of same-sex marriages. *Lewis et al. v. Harris et al.* is currently on appeal and likely destined for New Jersey's state Supreme Court. While Massachusetts took the spotlight following the first legal U.S. marriages of same-sex couples there in May, New Jersey and other states have active court challenges to their state marriage bans. This research brief offers insights into the issues at stake in New Jersey's same-sex marriage debate, especially those related to children being raised by gay and lesbian couples.¹ Findings from Census 2000 suggest that at least 10,000 children are being raised by gay and lesbian couples in New Jersey. Many of the rights associated with marriage, like access to health insurance and social security survivor benefits, are designed to provide some economic protection for children. The data confirm that New Jersey's same-sex families with children are already at some economic disadvantage compared to their heterosexual counterparts. The lack of marriage rights could be exacerbating that situation.

Data and methodology

Data for this report come from the full counts of Census 2000 along with the 5-percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of Census 2000. The 5-percent PUMS represents a one-in-four sample of the approximately 20 percent of American households that filled out a census long-form. The long-form contains detailed information about all members of the household, including a variety of demographic and economic characteristics.

Same-sex couples are identified from the household roster listing how everyone in the household is related to the "householder" filling out the census form. 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 household is counted as a same-sex unmarried partner household (see Gates and Ost [2004] for a detailed explanation of counting same-sex couples).

There are several potential reasons for suspecting an undercount of same-sex couples in the census tabulations. Concerns about the confidentiality of their responses may have led many gay 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 "unmarried partner" or "husband/wife"

¹ According to Lambda Legal, the organization representing the plaintiffs in *Lewis et al. v. Harris et al.*, five of the seven plaintiff couples are raising children. See <http://www.lambdalegal.org/cgi-bin/iowa/cases/record?record=179>.

does not accurately describe 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 and lesbian couples chose not to designate themselves as unmarried partners (Badgett and Rogers 2003). Estimates suggest that the true count is 10 percent to 50 percent higher than census figures (Gates and Ost 2004).

Gates and Ost (2004) also describe an additional measurement issue that affects counts of the couples with children. They suggest that Census 2000 procedures for enumerating same-sex couples may somewhat overstate the proportion of these couples with children. Their calculations suggest that the actual number of children being raised by same-sex couples with children in New Jersey may be approximately 10,000 children, instead of the estimate of 12,400 children derived from official Census Bureau statistics (Simmons and O'Connell 2003).

This report does not attempt to correct for either the potential undercount of couples or an overcount of couples with children. However, sensitivity analyses were conducted and show that while point estimates of various characteristics might vary somewhat, the broad trends (e.g., the household incomes of same-sex couples with children falling below the incomes of married couples with children) continue to be true even when adjustments for measurement error issues are made.

How many couples with children?

Same-sex couples in New Jersey are raising at least 10,000 children and official census figures put the number at nearly 12,400, as shown in Table 1. Nearly one-third (30 percent) of same-sex couples in New Jersey have children, compared with just under one-half (47 percent) of heterosexual cohabiting and married couples in the state (table 1). In keeping with national trends, the state's lesbian couples are more likely to be raising children than gay male couples (35 percent vs. 26 percent).

However, male same-sex couples with children have a higher average number of children than lesbian couples (2.02 vs. 1.93). It appears that same-sex couples raising children in New Jersey have a slightly higher average number of children than their heterosexual counterparts (1.97 vs. 1.90), though this difference is not statistically significant.

Table 1. Characteristics of coupled households in New Jersey, Census 2000.

	Heterosexual couples	Same-sex couples	Married	Heterosexual Unmarried partners	Same-sex male unmarried partners	Same-sex female unmarried partners
Number of households	1,773,036	16,604	1,638,322	134,714	8,257	8,347
Number of households with children	831,663	5,027	776,565	55,098	2,130	2,896
Share with children	46.9%	30.3%	47.4%	40.9%	25.8%	34.7%
Avg. number of children (among households with children)*	1.90	1.97	1.90	1.84	2.02	1.93
Number of children (est.)*	1,650,954	12,393	1,554,899	96,055	5,350	7,043

Source: Simmons and O'Connell (2003), except where noted

* Authors' calculations from Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

What are the characteristics of gay and lesbian families?

Among the two-thirds (70 percent) of same-sex couples in New Jersey who are not raising children, the median household income is \$73,400 (table 2). This is slightly higher than the \$71,500 median household income of heterosexual cohabiting and married couples without children. This differential can be partially explained by the educational levels attained by same-sex couples (52 percent have at least one partner with a college degree) compared with those attained by heterosexual couples (42 percent).

Similarly, higher education levels may explain why New Jersey's childless lesbian couples have higher household incomes than childless gay male couples (\$74,040 vs. \$73,200). This is a significant departure from the national trends in gay and lesbian household incomes. In general, the two male incomes of gay male couples produce a much higher median household income than the two female incomes of lesbian couples. However, among childless same-sex couples in New Jersey, 56 percent of the lesbian couples have at least one partner with a college degree, compared with 48 percent of the gay male couples.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of coupled households without children in New Jersey, Census 2000.

	Heterosexual couples	Same-sex couples	Married	Heterosexual Unmarried partners	Same-sex male unmarried partners	Same-sex female unmarried partners
Median household income	\$71,500	\$73,400	\$72,300	\$64,000	\$73,200	\$74,040
Share of couples having at least one spouse/partner with a college degree	42.2%	51.9%	42.2%	41.8%	47.9%	55.8%
Share who are white, non-Hispanic	81.1%	77.7%	81.8%	72.8%	80.0%	75.5%

Source: Authors' calculations from Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

The characteristics and trends among New Jersey couples with children tell a much different story. Gay and lesbian couples with children have significantly lower median household incomes than heterosexual couples with children (\$59,200 vs. \$75,380) (table 3). It is worth noting that heterosexual couples with children have higher median household incomes than their childless counterparts (\$75,380 vs. \$71,500), while same-sex couples with children have median household incomes that are well below their childless counterparts (\$59,200 vs. \$73,400).

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of coupled households with children in New Jersey, Census 2000.

	Heterosexual couples	Same-sex couples	Married	Heterosexual Unmarried partners	Same-sex male unmarried partners	Same-sex female unmarried partners
Median household income	\$75,380	\$59,200	\$78,000	\$48,000	\$66,500	\$54,300
Share of couples having at least one spouse/partner with a college degree	48.0%	32.9%	50.1%	15.9%	33.9%	32.1%
Share of parents who are white, non-Hispanic	67.8%	54.2%	69.6%	40.9%	51.6%	56.3%
Share of children who are white, non-Hispanic	68.1%	48.3%	70.1%	37.2%	47.9%	48.7%
Share of families with at least one adopted child	3.4%	5.7%	3.5%	2.1%	3.0%	7.8%

Number adopted children under age 18	33,659	409	32,479	1,180	85	324
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Source: Authors' calculations from Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

Again, these income differentials can be explained somewhat by educational levels attained. Nearly half (48 percent) of New Jersey's heterosexual couples with children have at least one spouse/partner with a college degree compared with a third (33 percent) of the state's same-sex couples with children. The higher share of heterosexual parents who are white (68 percent) compared with gay and lesbian parents who are white (54 percent) may also explain why gay and lesbian parents have lower household incomes. However, the increased racial diversity among same-sex couples without children did not cause their median income to fall below that of their heterosexual counterparts.

Not surprising, twice as many same-sex couples as heterosexual couples in New Jersey are raising adopted children (6 percent vs. 3 percent). However, given their biological capacity for bearing children, it is somewhat unexpected that lesbian couples are nearly three times as likely as gay male couples to be raising an adopted child (8 percent vs. 3 percent).

Conclusion

As these census data make clear, the court battle and public debate over same-sex marriage in New Jersey have human consequences. Census data provide evidence that many children being raised by same-sex couples are living with parents who have an economic and educational disadvantage. New Jersey's same-sex couples with children have lower median incomes and lower educational levels than childless same-sex couples and heterosexual couples with and without children. Easier access to health insurance and survivor benefits are two examples of benefits associated with marriage that could help to offset some of these economic disadvantages.

References

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