

In Cities, Suburbs and the Sticks

Gary Gates Uncovers the U.S. Communities that Same-Sex Couples Call Home

Gary Gates

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Gary J. Gates is co-author of [The Gay and Lesbian Atlas](#) (Urban Institute Press, 2004).



Not too long ago, only a few large US cities, such as San Francisco and New York, were thought of as gay meccas. Today, hundreds of American towns bear gay markings, not only in the form of a few fluttering rainbow flags but in thriving urban businesses, suburban cultural offerings and revitalised holiday venues.

US politicians, community planners, and development officials have taken notice. Baltimore, for example, recently launched an advertising campaign promoting itself to young professionals in nearby Washington D.C. and specifically targeted gays and lesbians.

In Oakland, California, councilman Danny Wan was recently quoted as saying that a gay district could "turn a tumble-down neighbourhood into an economic and social hot spot... boasting a panoply of coffee shops, bookstores, bars and movies houses—service-oriented businesses that foster social interaction."

Property developers, such as Detroit's David Farbman, agree. "The gay community tend to have the guts to go into an area as pioneers before the masses arrive," he told National Public Radio. They "go out ... and invest in the city around them."

After nearly a decade researching gay demographics and publishing the first gay and lesbian atlas of the US with Jason Ost, I can report that there is more than anecdotal evidence to support these attitudes.

Same-sex couples are indeed more likely than their married heterosexual counterparts to try out edgy areas. For example, crime rates in the typical neighbourhood of a same-sex male couple are 20 per cent higher than in the typical neighbourhood of a straight married couple.

Gay and lesbian couples also live in areas that are more urban, have older and smaller homes and are more racially and ethnically diverse. More than a third of the residents in the typical neighbourhood of a same-sex couple are non-white, compared with only a quarter in typical heterosexual married couple neighbourhoods.

Gay male couples, and to a lesser extent their lesbian counterparts, may opt for these areas because they have a lower probability of having children, fewer concerns about safety and schools, and more time and money to spend on home renovations. (About half of straight couples have kids compared with a third of lesbian couples and a fifth of gay male couples). Despite the fact that their neighbourhoods are more likely to start out as run-down, their investment and restorations pay off. According to our research, the median house price in the typical neighbourhood of gay male couples in the US exceeds that of their straight married counterparts by nearly 20 per cent.

But the crux of our atlas is geography—the concentrations of gay and lesbian communities across the US. And we've found that same-sex couples no longer limit themselves to city centre hotspots; they live in 99.3 per cent of US counties. Yes, large urban areas such as San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles have high concentrations of same-sex couples. But smaller metropolitan areas, such as Santa Fe, New Mexico; Portland, Maine; and Burlington, Vermont also rank highly. Drilling down to a ranking of 1,360 American communities with more than 50 same-sex couples, we found that the three communities with the highest concentrations look more bucolic than bustling, more Mayberry than Manhattan.

The "gayest" town in America is Provincetown, Massachusetts, a quaint fishing village with a population of about 3,200 at the tip of the Cape Cod peninsula. The summer tourist season swells the local population (which already has a concentration of resident same-sex couples more than 20 times the national average) to a gay majority. Classic New England clapboard houses, once fishermen's homes, now cater to gay and lesbian tourists as luxury bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants and antique shops.

Guerneville, California, a small town (population 2,500) in the heart of the Russian River wine region of Sonoma County, ranks No. 2, featuring resort town wine tours and charming B&Bs. Meanwhile, the third gayest city in America—Wilton Manors, Florida—is less a holiday spot than a typical small American town. Once a middle-class haven, it became riddled with crime and drug problems until a gay bar opened in a run-down strip mall in the late 1990s and started a remarkable change. Coffee shops and men's clothing stores followed, and the town's modest 1960s bungalows began selling for more than \$300,000.

Today, an estimated 40 per cent of adult men in Wilton Manors are gay, yet the town seems hardly to notice.

The trends in same-sex child rearing also defy geographic stereotypes. Mississippi is the state where same-sex couples are most likely to be raising children, while more than a third of gay and lesbian couples have kids in South Dakota, Alaska, South Carolina, and Louisiana. These places are neither gay meccas, nor are they politically liberal (President Bush won all five states in 2000 by an average margin of 19 percentage points). But they are places where many people, gay and straight, have families.

Gay seniors also abound in areas not known for their sizeable gay populations. North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and West Virginia have the oldest populations of same-sex couples. Nearly half of all gay men and lesbians couples in North Dakota are aged 55 or older.

In a similar ranking of metro areas, six of the top 10 are in Florida, a state known for attracting retirees. Well over a third of gay men and lesbian couples are seniors in Florida communities, such as Punta Gorda, Sarasota, Naples, Ocala, Fort Myers, and Fort Pierce. The same is true of my hometown of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a small working-class city populated by many retired steel workers and coal miners, which came in sixth in this ranking.

The southern states in the US are home to large and vibrant African-American communities, so it is probably no coincidence that the highest proportions of African-American same-sex couples are found in small towns like Sumter, South Carolina; Albany, Georgia; Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Rocky Mount, North Carolina; and Florence, South Carolina. High proportions of Hispanic same-sex couples are common in many Texas communities with large immigrant populations including McAllen, Laredo, and Brownsville, El Paso, and San Antonio. Not all our findings were surprising, however. Vermont (the birthplace of civil unions in the US) and California were the two states with the largest concentration of same-sex couples, while San Francisco and many communities around it topped the list for metropolitan areas.

The postal codes with the highest proportion of gay and lesbian couples include many urban neighbourhoods once seen as derelict but known now for their vibrant gay communities. The top ten include the Castro and Haight Asbury neighbourhoods in San Francisco, Chelsea in New York and Roxbury in Boston. "Pioneering" gay men and lesbians played a key role in remaking these once run-down areas into prime destinations for all city residents, a scenario apparently now being repeated across the country.

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- [Gary Gates](#)

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