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Family formation and raising children among same-sex couples

by Gary J. Gates, Williams Distinguished Scholar, Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, GATES@law.ucla.edu

The weekly adventures of gay couple Mitchell and Cameron and their baby on the popular television program *Modern Family* highlight a common contemporary media image of gay parenting: wealthy, urban, and White gay men raising an adopted child. An analysis of broadcast media by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2007) found that this demographic dominates media images of the entire lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Within scholarly research, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) observe that contemporary studies of parenting by same-sex couples have focused largely on lesbian couples who are raising adopted children or children that they conceived via artificial insemination or some form of repro-

ductive technology. While predominantly female, these research subjects share many traits with Mitch and Cam. They tend to be disproportionately White with relatively high levels of income and education. This article will explore the demographic characteristics of lesbian and gay parents and consider some of the challenges these characteristics pose for policymakers and scholars.



Gary Gates

Among self-identified lesbians and gay men in the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, one third of lesbians and one in six gay men say they have had children. Analyses of the 2008 General Social Survey suggest that 19% of gay and bisexual men and 49% of lesbians and bisexual women say they have had a child.

How Common is Parenting Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People?

Among self-identified lesbians and gay men in the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, one third of lesbians and one in six gay men say they have had children

(Macomber et al., 2007). Analyses of the 2008 General Social Survey suggest that 19% of gay and bisexual men and 49% of lesbians and bisexual women say they have had a child.

ductive technology. While predominantly female, these research subjects share many traits with Mitch and Cam. They tend to be disproportionately White with relatively high levels of income and education. U.S. Census Bureau data suggest that the demographic characteristics of same-sex couples raising children are substantially more diverse than the predominant subjects of scholarly research and media images of lesbian and gay parenting. Most notably, analyses of these data show substantial

U.S. Census Bureau data on same-sex couples allow for a consideration of trends in parenting among same-sex couples since 1990. Figure 1 shows the percentage of same-sex, unmarried-partner couples who have children under the age of 18 in the home. The findings show an increase

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in childrearing from 12% of couples in 1990 to nearly 19% of couples in 2006. Since then, the percentage of such couples raising children has declined to 16%. This pattern seems to contradict the prevailing view that increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men (and same-sex couples) are raising children. However, a closer look at these data sug-

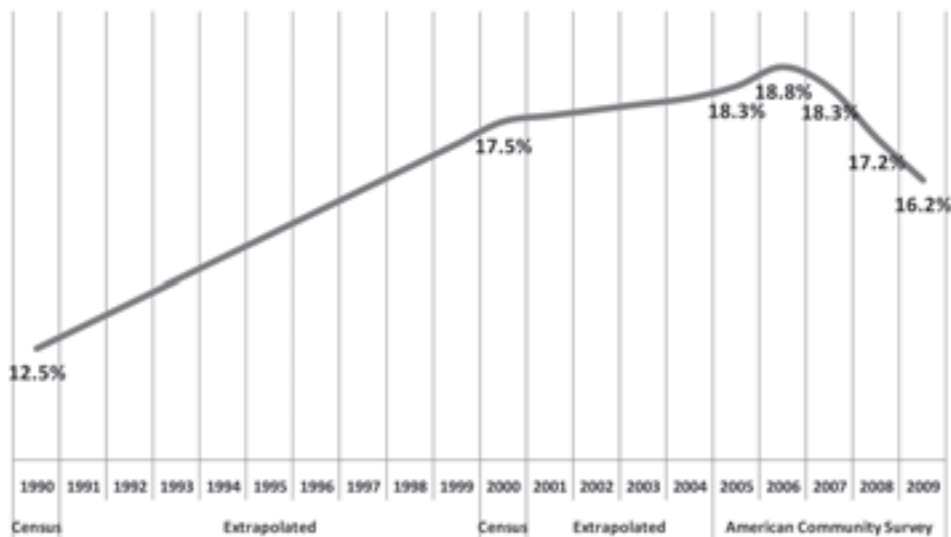
adoptive parenting and parenting using reproductive technologies. This could explain the overall reduced number of same-sex couples who have children.

Several data sources offer evidence that a common path to parenthood for LGB men and women is a relationship with a different-sex partner when they are young. First, data

was born. For lesbians and bisexual women, the figure was 37.9%; this difference was statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Second, the characteristics of same-sex couples raising children, as observed in the ACS, are consistent with patterns one might expect if many LGB people were bringing up children from prior different-sex relationships. In the 2009 data, 28% of individuals in same-sex couples who were previously married (presumably to a different-sex partner) had children under age 18 in the home, compared to just 16% of those who said they had never been married. Among those in same-sex couples who were previously married, 23.5% report a biological or stepchild in the home, compared to just 9.5% among those who never married. Conversely, among never-married individuals in same-sex couples who report children in the home, 22.6% say that at least one of the children is adopted. Among their previously married counterparts, the figure is half that at 11.5%. Notably, the average age of adopted children living with same-sex couples is nearly 4 years younger than that of biological or stepchildren (8.3 vs. 12.4 years old). This is evidence that individuals in same-sex couples who were previously married are much more likely to have biological or stepchildren (perhaps from a previous marriage), while

Figure 1. % of same-sex unmarried partner couples with children under the age of 18 in the home*



*Author analyses of Public Use Microdata Files: 1990 Census, 2000 Census, 2005-2009 American Community Survey. For comparability purposes, analyses only include same-sex couples who identified one partner as an "unmarried partner." Couples who designated a partner as a "husband" or "wife" are not included.

gests that there may be two different trends occurring with regard to parenting.

How Do Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People Come to Be Parents?

In the 2000 U.S. Census, nearly 10% of the same-sex, unmarried-partner couples raising children were in households with an adopted child present. By 2009, American Community Survey (ACS) data suggest that the comparable figure had nearly doubled to 19%. Clearly, the decade saw a substantial rise in adoptive parenting by same-sex couples. Nevertheless, those increases may have been offset by decreases in parenting by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals who had children at a relatively young age (likely before they were open about or aware of their same-sex sexual orientation) in a relationship with a different-sex partner. Declines in social stigma toward LGB people mean that more are coming out earlier in life and are becoming less likely to have children with different-sex partners. These declines may be outpacing increases in

from population-based surveys suggest that LGB individuals are younger than non-LGB individuals when they have their first child. In the 2008 General Social Survey, the average age of LGB respondents when they had or gave birth to their first child was 22.5 years. Among heterosexuals, the average age was older, at 24.1 years (although the difference was not statistically significant). A similar pattern is observed for women in the 2009 California Health Interview Survey. Among women who have had a child, 22.4% of heterosexual women said they were under age 20 when their first child

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Rank	Region	% of Same-sex couples raising children under age 18
1	East South Central Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee	26.3%
2	West South Central Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas	26.0%
3	New England Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont	24.4%
4	Mountain Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming	23.8%
5	West North Central Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota	23.4%
6	East North Central Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin	23.3%
7	Mid-Atlantic New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania	22.8%
8	Pacific Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington	21.3%
9	South Atlantic Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia	21.1%

Table 1. Regions ranked by % of same-sex couples with children under age 18 in the home (American Community Survey, 2005-2009)

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those were never married are more likely to have adopted children (perhaps later in life).

What are the Demographic Characteristics of Same-Sex Couples with Children?

Geographically, same-sex couples are most likely to have children in many of the most socially conservative parts of the country. Analyses of ACS data from 2005–2009 (see Table 1) show that same-sex parenting is more common in the South, where more than 26% of same-sex couples are raising children, than in more socially liberal regions like New England (24%) or the Pacific states (21%).

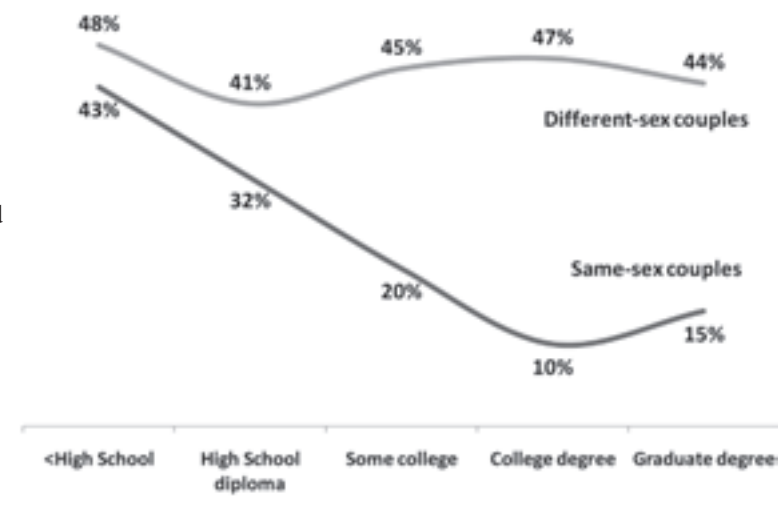
Among individuals in same-sex couples, childrearing is substantially higher among African-American, Latino, and Native American/Alaskan natives (see Figure 2). This is also true for different-sex couples, but the relative differences between rates of White and African-American parenting, in particular, are greater among individuals in same-sex couples. African-Americans in same-sex couples are 2.4 times more likely than their White counterparts to be raising children (40% v. 16%, respectively). Latinos and Latinas (28%) in same-sex couples are 1.7 times more likely than Whites to be raising children, and American Indians/Alaska Natives (24%) are 1.5 times more likely. For different-sex couples, African-Americans are only 1.3 times more likely than Whites to be

raising children. The comparable figures for Latinos and Latinas and American Indians/Alaska Natives in different-sex couples are 1.7 and 1.3, respectively.

The pattern is the opposite when we consider adoptive parenting. White same-sex couples with children are almost twice as likely as same-sex couples with a non-White partner to be raising an adopted child. Among White same-sex couples with children, 18% report having an adopted child, compared to 9.6% of comparable couples that include a non-White partner.

Childrearing among same-sex couples is also substantially more common among those with lower levels of education. Among individuals in same-sex couples who have less than a high school degree, 43% are raising children. Only 15% percent of those with a graduate degree have children. This pattern is not true in different-sex couples, where between 41% and 48% are

Figure 3. % of individuals in couples with children under age 18 in the home, by educational attainment (American Community Survey, 2009)



raising children, regardless of their educational attainment.

As with observed racial/ethnic differences in childrearing, the pattern is the opposite with regard to adoptive parenting. Among individuals in same-sex couples who are raising children, education is clearly correlated with the likelihood of having an adopted child in the home. Among those with a high school diploma or lower levels of educational attainment, less than 8% have an adopted child. For college graduates, the comparable figure is 18% and among those with a graduate degree, fully one third have an adopted child.

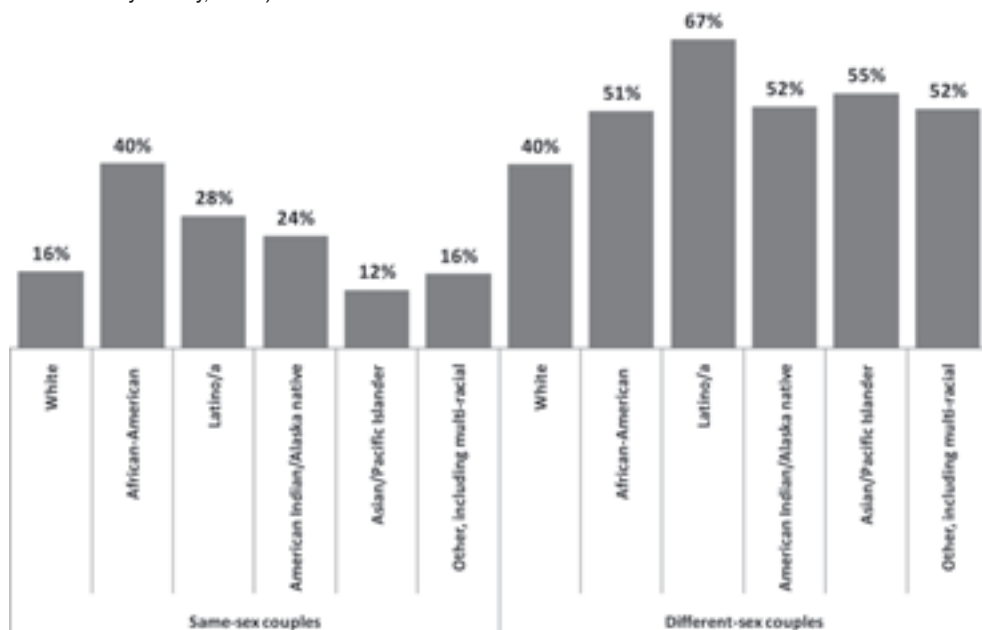
Given the connections between parenting and education, it is perhaps not surprising that same-sex couples with children show evidence of economic disadvantage relative to their different-sex counterparts. In analyses of data from the 2000 U.S. Census, Albelda and colleagues (2009) show that 20% of children being raised by same-sex couples are living in poverty compared to only 9.4% of children being raised by different-sex married couples.

What Do These Patterns Regarding LGB Parenting Mean?

The available data garnered from population-based sources demonstrate unique dynamics of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, gender, and sexual orientation that intersect and interact to affect how LGB people come to be parents and what types of legal and economic resources they may have

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Figure 2. % of individuals in couples with children under age 18 in the home, by race/ethnicity (American Community Survey, 2009)



to bring up their children. Findings presented here reveal a portrait of LGB families who likely face a variety of legal and economic challenges.

The geographic data suggest that many same-sex couples raising children live in states with legal environments that at best are not supportive and at worst are openly hostile toward LGB individuals and their families. This could be particularly problematic for establishing legal parentage or guardianship rights. If a state does not allow second-parent adoptions, nonadoptive parents could be legal strangers to their children. Similarly, in the absence of legal relationship recognitions like marriage, civil unions, or registered domestic partnerships, stepparents may have no ability to establish any type of legal guardianship relationship with their stepchildren. The absence of these parenting and guardianship relationships could mean, for example, that a nonlegal parent would not have any right to make

potentially life-altering emergency medical decisions for a child if a legal parent were for some reason not available.

The racial/ethnic and economic diversity that we observe among same-sex couples and their families counters prevailing media images of this population and challenges scholars to broaden the scope of the research on LGB families and parenting. Unfortunately, one important reason that scholars have not explored this diversity as fully as they might is a lack of data. Explicit LGBT inclusion within population-based data sources remains the exception rather than the rule.

A recent Institute of Medicine report on LGBT-related health disparities called on federal statistical agencies to collect more and better data that allow for the identification of LGBT individuals and their families. As data resources improve, scholars must consider how the interplay of racial and ethnic cultural norms, geographic location, and socioeconomic status intersect with sexual

orientation to affect LGBT individuals and their families. Social scientists will, ideally, expand the conceptual and theoretical frameworks by which they frame their research and consider the rich demographic variation within the LGBT community. ■

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