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FAQ: Same-Sex Couples in the 2008 American Community Survey

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5rm9m88p>

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### Publication Date

2009-09-01



# Same-Sex Couples in the 2008 American Community Survey

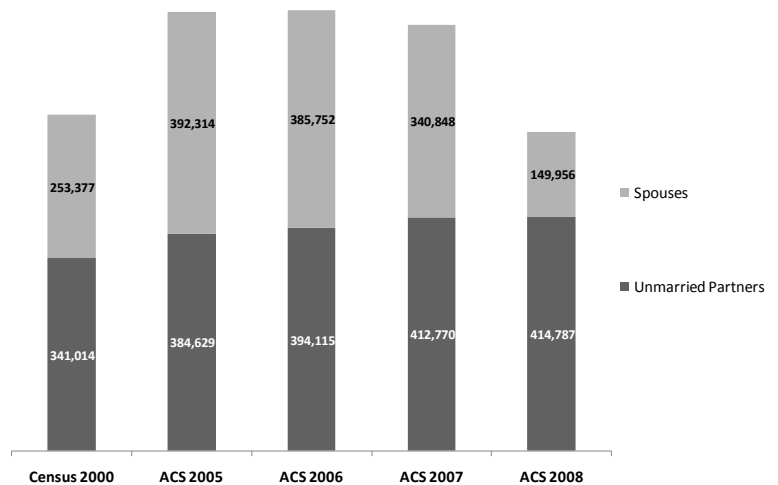
September 2009

## Introduction

The US Census Bureau has released new data regarding same-sex couples from the 2008 American Community Survey. Notably, this marks the first time the Census Bureau has released official estimates for the number of same-sex spouses in the US. Principal findings include:

- An estimated 149,956 same-sex couples identified one partner as a husband or wife.
- An estimated 414,787 additional same-sex couples identified as “unmarried partners”.
- The total estimate of 564,743 same-sex couples marks a decline from recent ACS estimates of nearly 780,000 same-sex couples. This is likely the result of improvements in ACS data collection procedures and suggests that past estimates may have been overstated.

Same-sex couples in the Census and American Community Survey  
Spouses v. Unmarried Partners



## FAQ: 2008 ACS and Key Findings Regarding Same-Sex Couples

### What is the American Community Survey?

Unlike the US Census, which seeks to count all US households once a decade, the ACS is an annual survey of several million American households (also conducted by the Census Bureau) that provides detailed geographic, economic, and demographic information about the US population.

### Why are the 2008 ACS data important?

ACS data, like data from the decennial Census, provide vital and widely trusted information about same-sex couples and their families that cannot be acquired from any other data sources. Research using these data has been used to inform legislative initiatives, court cases, and corporate policies concerning marriage equality and relationship recognition,

employment benefits, discrimination, immigration, and military service.

### What is different about the 2008 ACS data?

This marks the first time that the Census Bureau has released estimates of the number of same-sex couples who use the terms husband or wife to describe one of the partners. Also, improvements to ACS survey design and tabulation procedures resulted in a lower estimate for the number of same-sex couples than has been reported in prior ACS data releases.

### **How are same-sex couples counted?**

The ACS bases its population estimates on household surveys. Same-sex couples are identified in households where the “householder” (the person who rents or owns the home) identifies another adult of the same sex as either a “husband/wife” or an “unmarried partner”. Other households that might contain two adults of the same sex (like siblings, cousins, roommates or boarders) are identified differently and counted separately from same-sex couples.

### **Can we assume that the nearly 150,000 same-sex couples who said they were spouses are legally married?**

No. Williams Institute analyses suggest that by the end of 2008, approximately 35,000 same-sex couples were legally married in the US. Approximately 86,000 couples (some of whom may have also gotten married) were in legally recognized relationships like civil unions and registered domestic partnerships.

### **Does the ACS collect data on same-sex couples in civil unions and registered domestic partnerships?**

No. The ACS (and the upcoming Census 2010) has no way for same-sex couples to indicate that they are in a civil union or registered domestic partnership.

### **If same-sex spouses are not legally married, why would they use terms like “husband” and “wife” to describe themselves?**

Regardless of the legal options available to them to formalize their status as couples, many same-sex couples consider their relationships to be equivalent to marriage. It is likely that some view the terms “husband” and “wife” as the most accurate description of their relationship, even in the absence of legal marriage rights. Likewise, same-sex couples who have registered as domestic partners, had a civil union, or who may have celebrated a commitment ceremony or been married in a religious ceremony not recognized by the state may also consider themselves to be spouses.

### **Will same-sex spouses be counted as married in Census Bureau statistics?**

No. Since the number of same-sex couples who use the terms “husband” and “wife” to describe a partner far exceeds the number of legally married same-sex couples in the US, the Census Bureau has decided not to include same-sex couples among official estimates for the number of married couples in the US.

### **Why did the estimated number of same-sex couples decline so much?**

In counts of same-sex couples from Census 2000 and estimates from subsequent annual ACS data, all same-sex spouses were counted as same-sex unmarried partners. A recent paper authored by Williams Institute researchers Gary Gates and Michael Steinberger<sup>1</sup> analyzed ACS data and demonstrated that a very large fraction of these same-sex spouses likely were not actually same-sex. Instead, they were different-sex married couples who made a mistake and checked an incorrect sex box for one of the spouses (which resulted in being mistakenly counted among same-sex couples). This miscoding artificially inflated the number of same-sex couples.

The 2008 ACS included an improved redesign of both the survey and post-data collection editing techniques that will conform to standards that also will be used in the upcoming Census 2010. These changes reduced the rate of sex miscoding among different-sex spouses. The result: the same-sex couple sample includes far fewer miscoded different-sex spouses. These new data offer a more reliable estimate for the total number of same-sex couples that is understandably lower than past estimates from the ACS.

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<sup>1</sup> Gates, GJ and Steinberger, M. “Same-Sex Unmarried Partner Couples in the American Community Survey: The Role of Misreporting, Miscoding and Misallocation,” Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Population Association of America, Detroit, MI, April 30, 2009.

**Is the Census Bureau doing anything to improve future data on same-sex couples?**

Yes. As part of Census 2010, the Bureau has announced a large-scale project to improve the accuracy and quality of future data collected from same-sex couples. This project will consider ways to change forms or perhaps add questions to collect more accurate information about the legal marital status of same-sex couples along with identifying those couples in civil unions and registered domestic partnerships.

The Census has recruited a panel of national experts (including Williams Institute demographer Gary Gates) to serve as a scholarly advisory board for the project. The multi-year study likely will result in alterations to future ACS and Census survey questions to provide more accurate data on same-sex couples and their families.

**So what are the main implications of the 2008 ACS data release?**

First, the decision to release estimates of the number of same-sex couples who say they are spouses marks a major advance in how the Census Bureau reports data on same-sex couples. More such advances appear likely given ongoing research by the Census Bureau.

Second, while it is disappointing to learn that earlier estimates of the number of same-sex couples were overstated, this instead points to more public education and advocacy. It is possible that many same-sex couples may not understand how to report their relationships as such or, perhaps more likely, they are reluctant to do so due to stigma, legal sensibilities and concerns about confidentiality. As Census 2010 approaches, outreach efforts should be accelerated to the LGBT community and especially to same-sex couples to provide education about how the Census works and how important it is to accurately respond to and complete the Census forms.

To that end, the Williams Institute is a proud sponsor of the Our Families Count initiative ([www.ourfamiliescount.org](http://www.ourfamiliescount.org)) designed to educate LGBT people and encourage their participation in Census 2010.