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The Effects of Marriage Equality in Massachusetts: A survey of the experiences and impact of marriage on same-sex couples

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Authors

Ramos, Christopher
Goldberg, Naomi G
Badgett, M.V. Lee

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Executive Summary

May 17th, 2009 marks the 5th year of marriage equality in the state of Massachusetts. To mark this anniversary, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health conducted the largest survey to date of married same-sex couples, the Health and Marriage Equality in Massachusetts (HMEM) survey.

Who is getting married?

- Over 61% of individuals in same-sex marriages are women, and most are in their forties, statistics which match official marriage records from the state of Massachusetts.
Married same-sex couples in Massachusetts are highly educated (85% finished college) and have high median incomes (\$110,000 – 129,000).

Why are same-sex couples getting married?

- The vast majority of respondents (93%) stated that they married for love and commitment.
Eighty-five percent listed legal recognition as one of their three main motivations for marrying.

What impact has marriage had on same-sex relationships?

- As a result of marrying, individuals feel more committed to their partners and more accepted by their families and communities. Over 72% felt more committed to their partners and almost 70% felt more accepted by their communities.
Nearly 9 out of 10 respondents (89%) reported that all or most family members supported their marriage.
Respondents also reported legal and economic benefits. Nearly half (48%) report that being married means that they worry less about legal problems, and 30% report that one member of the couple receives health benefits from an employer as a result of being married.
Respondents also reported that being married makes them more likely to be out. More than 80% of respondents indicate that being in a same-sex marriage has caused them to be more likely to come out to coworkers (82%) and healthcare providers (83%).

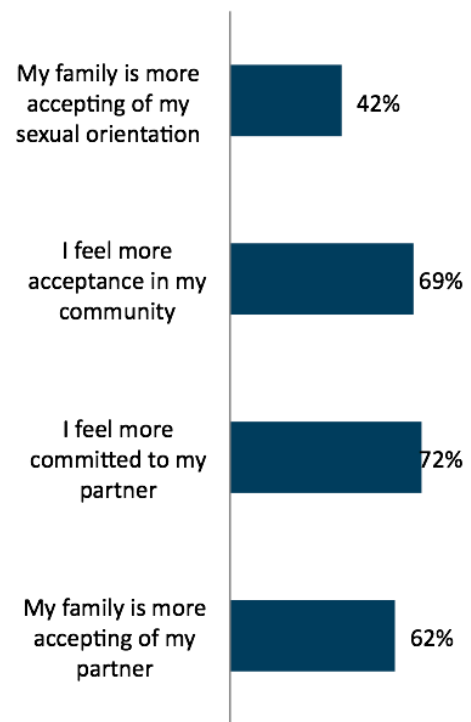
What impact has marriage had on the children of same-sex couples?

- More than one-quarter (28%) of couples are raising children.
Of those with children, nearly all respondents (93%) agreed or somewhat agreed that their children are happier and better off as a result of their marriage.
Very few respondents with children (5%) reported that their children were teased as a result of their marriages, while many reported that their children felt more secure and protected, gained a sense of stability, and saw their families validated by society as a result of marriage.

The survey data show that marriage has been a positive factor in the lives of these same-sex couples. In addition to the legal rights that come with that status, couples report increased societal and familial acceptance, increased commitment to one another, and less stress around legal issues. Clearly, evidence from the survey suggests that marriage comes with a number of positive short-term and potentially long-term benefits to the couples, their children, and society.

Impact of Marriage

Agree/Agree somewhat



Methods

The Health and Marriage Equality in Massachusetts (HMEM) survey was administered by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH). In order to capture the largest sample possible, participants were solicited to complete an online questionnaire through Massachusetts' largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender advocacy organization, MassEquality. They sent the survey to 38,210 households on its mailing list. A follow-up email went out halfway through the data collection period. They received 1,608 completed responses in a one week period, yielding a response rate of 4.2%.

In an effort to focus solely on married same-sex couples, this report only reports on those individuals who stated that they are currently legally married to a same-sex partner. We identified 558 respondents who met these criteria. HMEM constitutes the largest sample of self-identified married same-sex couples to date. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, as of September 2008, had recorded 12,167 marriages by same-sex couples, which constitutes 52% of all same-sex couples in Massachusetts (using counts from the American Community Survey 2005-2007).

Because MassEquality's outreach strategies most likely do not attract a random sample of individuals, this sample is probably not representative of all same-sex couples. However, it is the largest available to date, and the organization made efforts to find and add names of all married same-sex couples to its list, suggesting that it might provide a reasonably broad sample.

To assess how representative the sample is, we compare two key demographic characteristics (age and sex) to data from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Registry of Vital Records and Statistics from 2004-2007. Our sample includes 338 women (61%) and 214 men (39%). This sex breakdown is similar to the latest statistics available from Vital Records and Statistics; from 2004-2007, 64% of all 22,264 individuals in officially recorded same-sex marriages were women. The median age range for those in same-sex marriages officially recorded with the State is 40-49. The survey sample's median age range is also 40-49. The similarity in age and sex of the survey sample to official marriages recorded with the state of Massachusetts bolsters the generalizability of the sample.

Profile of Married Couples

The Health and Marriage Equality in Massachusetts (HMEM) survey allows us for the first time to paint a socio-economic and demographic portrait of married same-sex couples. Below we present two tables: Table 1 focuses on the personal characteristics of those married same-sex partners, while Table 2 displays several socio-economic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1 reveals more female same-sex marriages, with over 61% of the sample identifying as women. Two individuals identified as “other,” and 2% identified as transgender in a separate question. Almost all identify their sexual orientation as homosexual, lesbian, or gay, with only 5% reporting being bisexual and 1% “other.” The average married woman is 46 years old, somewhat younger than the average married gay man, who is 51. In terms of race and ethnicity, self-identified white individuals make up 91% of the sample.

Table One: Personal Characteristics

	Percentage	Frequency
Sex (n=554)		
Male	39%	214
Female	61%	338
Sexual orientation (n=558)		
Homosexual, gay, or lesbian	94%	526
Bisexual	5%	27
Other	1%	5
Average age (n=551)	48	
Male	51	
Female	46	
Race/Ethnicity (n=555)		
White	91%	504
Black	1%	8
Latino/a	2%	12
Asian	1%	7
Other	4%	24

Table 2 explores the social and economic characteristics of married same-sex couples. Several variables presented in this second table stand out. As in many other studies of same-sex couples, these individuals have high levels of education. Approximately 85% of respondents finished college, and 57% of respondents have attended graduate school. This high level of education is likely related to the high incomes reported by respondents. The median household income range is \$110,000 to \$129,999, with 52% of respondents earning a combined household income of more than \$110,000. The high income likely reflects both the influence of very high education levels and the fact that Massachusetts is a high-income state. In the American Community Survey, same-sex unmarried partner couples have a median household income of \$91,700. The HMEM sample may have drawn upon higher earning individuals than the general population. Alternatively, it may be that higher income couples are more likely to marry, so the HMEM sample may be representative of the population of married same-sex couples.

Other socio-economic characteristics help us to further describe who is getting married. Eighty-four percent of respondents are currently employed, 4% are unemployed, and 12% would be considered out of the labor force. Almost all married same-sex couples consist of two United States citizens. Only 4% are binational, where one partner is a U.S. citizen and the other is not. Finally, of those respondents that answered, 84% were never married while 16% were previously married to a different-sex partner.

Table Two: Socio-Economic Characteristics		
	Percentage	Frequency
Education (n=559)		
High school graduated	3%	16
Some college	12%	69
College graduate	28%	154
Graduate school and advanced degrees	57%	320
Employment Status (n=537)		
At work	83%	444
Employed but not at work	1%	7
Doing unpaid work	3%	14
Unable to work	2%	11
Unemployed but seeking	4%	23
Keeping home	4%	24
In school	3%	14
Couple Type by Citizenship (n=499)		
Both citizens	96%	479
Binational (one citizen and other non-citizen)	4%	19
Both non-citizens	<1%	1
Household Income Ranges (n=527)		
Median household income range	\$110,000 - \$129,999	47
\$0.00 - \$19,999	1%	4
\$20,000 - \$39,999	4%	23
\$40,000 - \$59,999	9%	45
\$60,000 - \$89,999	20%	108
\$90,000 - \$109,999	14%	72
> \$110,000	52%	275
Previous Marital Status (n=543)		
Never married	84%	454
Yes, to a different-sex partner	16%	87
Yes, to a same-sex partner	<1%	2

Motivation to Marry

Married same-sex respondents were asked a series of questions about their decision to marry and what impact marriage has had on their lives.

Individuals were asked to identify the three most important reasons that they chose to marry. Of the individuals who responded, almost all (93%) reported that the love and commitment they shared with their partner was a reason for marrying. Nearly nine out of ten respondents (85%) indicated that they married because they wished for their relationship to have legal status.

The other important factors were cited less commonly. Four in ten report wanting to have society know about lesbian or gay relationships. Twenty percent cited factors related to their children. Less than one in five respondents indicated that issues pertaining to finances such as estate planning (18%), property (14%), or the ability to obtain health benefits (13%) played an important role in their decision to marry.

Being married has positively impacted respondents' interactions with their spouses, families, and communities. Seventy-two percent of individuals agreed that marriage had increased their commitment to their spouses. Seven out of ten also said that they feel more accepted in their own community as a result of being married. Sixty-two percent agreed that their families have become more accepting of their partner as a result of being married.

Why Marry?

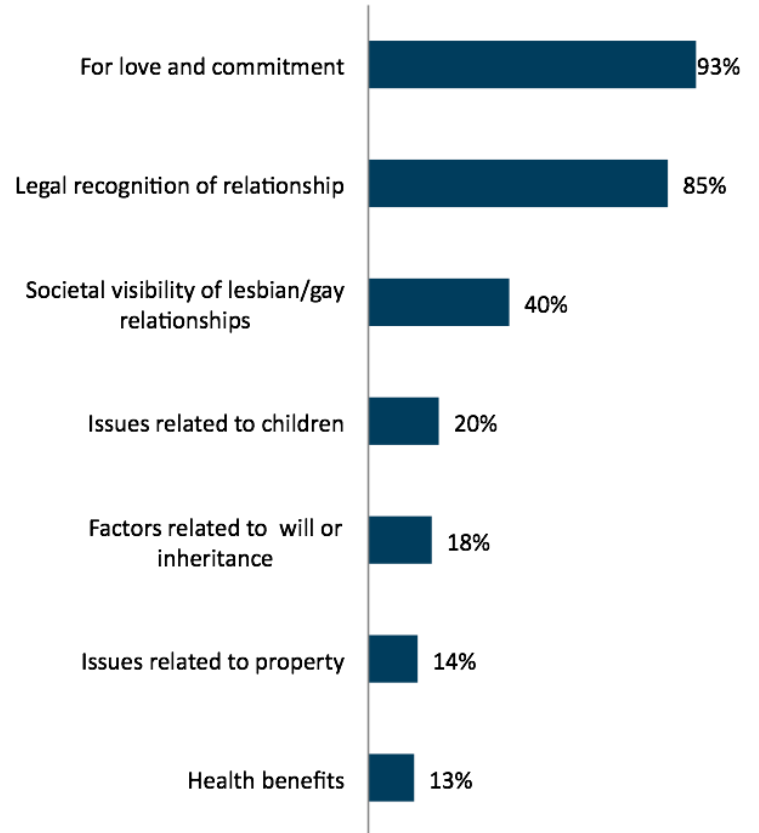


Table Three: Effects of Marriage

	Agree	Agree Somewhat	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	N/A	Not Sure
My family is more accepting of my partner (n=527)	39%	23%	15%	3%	12%	9%
I feel more committed to my partner (n=523)	50%	22%	15%	4%	7%	2%
I feel more acceptance in my community (n=529)	38%	31%	9%	3%	5%	14%
My family is more accepting of my sexual orientation (524)	21%	21%	20%	6%	14%	18%

Table Four: How Has Marriage Changed Your Life?

	Percentage	Frequency
How has marriage changed you or your relationship? (n=541)		
Increased commitment	49%	263
Spouse more accepted by family members	24%	128
One of us receives health benefits from an employer	30%	160
Children happier/better off	9%	46
Feel more financially stable	14%	77
Worry less about legal problems	48%	257
Bought a house together	5%	25
Others expect us to act differently towards each other	3%	15
We are now monogamous	2%	12
I feel more sure of my partner's commitment to this relationship	9%	47
Less likely to break-up	7%	38
More accepted by society	38%	204
We take better care of each other	7%	38
Decided to raise a child together	7%	37
Other	17%	91

Respondents also reported that marriage has had legal and economic benefits. Nearly half of respondents (48%) report that being married means that they worry less about legal problems. Taking into account that 85% of respondents stated that they married in part to have their relationship legally recognized, it is noteworthy that nearly half of respondents report that they, in fact, do feel less concerned about legal problems.

While only 13% of respondents indicated that obtaining health benefits constituted a primary factor in their decision to marry, 30% report that one member of the couple receives health benefits from an employer as a result of being married. Fourteen percent of respondents felt more financially stable overall as a result of marrying.

Impact on Couples

Many external pressures weigh on the stability and success of couples. These include social acceptance, the ability to express oneself genuinely, and community engagement. The majority of respondents reported that marriage has helped to increase both social acceptance and the willingness of respondents to be out.

In general, married same-sex couples report a high degree of family support associated with their marriage (see Table 5). Nearly nine out of ten respondents (89%) reported that all or most family members supported their marriage. When asked about parental reactions, over four-fifths (82%) agreed or somewhat agreed that their parents reacted positively. Respondents report even more positive reactions from siblings (91% agreement) and other family members (88%).

More than 80% of respondents indicate that being in a same-sex marriage has caused them to be more likely to come out to coworkers (82%) and healthcare providers (83%). For those with children, 84% thought that marriage made them more likely to be out in situations relating to their children at school (see Table 6). In general, respondents report very high levels of being out to family, friends and coworkers, but even so they report that marriage has increased the likelihood that they will come out.

Married same-sex couples show a high degree of community engagement. The vast majority of respondents (77%) report volunteering at least once or twice in the past 12 months (see Table 7). Most respondents in married same-sex couples report engaging in volunteer service for political (56%), charitable (57%), and other (53%) volunteer activities. Nearly a third of respondents (31%) report volunteering in their church.

Table Five: Family Reactions to Marriage

	Agree	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree	Not Sure
My parents reacted positively (n=466)	64% (300)	18% (85)	5% (25)	7% (33)	5% (23)
My siblings reacted positively (n=503)	75% (379)	16% (79)	4% (22)	2% (10)	3% (13)
Other family members reacted positively (n=514)	65% (333)	23% (118)	4% (18)	2% (9)	7% (36)

Table Six: Outness

As a result of being married, do you think that you're more likely to come out when:	Percentage	Frequency
Dealing with coworkers (n=451)		
Yes	82%	370
No	18%	81
Dealing with my children at school (n=134)		
Yes	84%	113
No	16%	21
Dealing with health care providers (n=485)		
Yes	83%	403
No	17%	82
Those who say they are completely out to the following people or groups:		
Immediate family (n=529)	95%	502
Relatives other than immediate family (n=521)	67%	350
To current heterosexual friends (n=526)	93%	489
To heterosexual acquaintances (n=528)	61%	320
To heterosexual friends whom you knew before coming out (n=501)	75%	377
To boss and other supervisors (n=477)	87%	417
To coworkers (n=496)	75%	371

Impact on Children

More than one-quarter (28%) of respondents indicate that they have children in their home and that they and/or their spouse serves as a parent to those children (see Table 8). Of these households, nearly all respondents (93%) agreed or somewhat agreed that their children are happier and better off as a result of their marriage. One-quarter responded that their children have been explicitly teased or taunted about having gay or lesbian parents. However, only 5% indicated that their children have been explicitly teased or taunted as a result of their parents' wedding or marital status.

Married parents were asked, "How has your being married affected your children?" The written responses to this open-ended question give a richer sense of how marriage equality appears to have affected children of same-sex couples. Responses from 164 parents ranged from a phrase or sentence to mini-essays. The answers to the question primarily fell into two categories: parents' perceptions of their children's feelings about marriage and parents' assessments of the value of marriage to their parenting. Parents of very young children and of grown children often reported little or no impact on children, accounting for about one in five responses.

Table Seven: Volunteer Activities

Have you done any volunteer activities in the past 12 months in the following areas?	6 or more times	3-5 times	Once or twice	No
Political activities(n=515)	15% (75)	10% (54)	31% (161)	44% (225)
Charitable activities (n=507)	16% (79)	13% (64)	29% (147)	43% (217)
Religious and church related activities (n=501)	14% (68)	6% (32)	11% (53)	69% (348)
School-based activities (n=142)	18% (25)	15% (21)	23% (32)	45% (64)
Any other kind of voluntary activities (n=494)	18% (91)	10% (50)	24% (120)	47% (233)

Table Eight: Children

	Percentage	Frequency
Do you or your spouse have a child(ren) in the home with whom you or your spouse serve as a parent? (n=541)		
Yes	28%	153
No	72%	388
Has your child been explicitly teased or taunted about having gay or lesbian parents? (n=147)		
Yes	24%	35
No	76%	112
Has your child been explicitly teased or taunted about your wedding or marital status? (n=147)		
Yes	5%	7
No	95%	140
Effect of marriage: Children happier/better off (n=145)		
Agree	83%	120
Agree somewhat	10%	15
Not sure	4%	6
Disagree somewhat	1%	2
Disagree	1%	2

Most of those responding to this question reported that their marriage had had a positive effect on their children, however.

Many parents reported that their children felt more secure and protected. Others noted that their children gained a sense of stability. A third common response was that marriage allowed children to see their families as being validated or legitimated by society or the government. Sometimes this feeling had a direct effect on children's relationship to their parents, stepparents, or siblings by increasing the sense of being connected to those family members.

Reports of negative effects of marriage on children, such as teasing at school, were extremely rare (as found in the other question in Table 7 above) and often only temporary. Only one parent reported teasing that was directly tied to the parents' marriage, and in most of the other rare cases, the teasing had happened long before the parents married, sometimes in a different state. In one family, the teasing had long stopped and the child's friends even attended the parents' wedding. Two parents reported the flipside of teasing, noting that their children were actually perceived as being "cool" by their peers for having married gay parents.

Two parents reported that their children expressed fear that their family would be harmed by marriage. In one case, the child's fear was generated by seeing anti-gay protesters and rhetoric in the newspaper; in the other case the child feared that his parents' marriage would be undone by subsequent legal changes.

Many parents saw marriage as a status that provided external supports for their children. According to their parents, children gain legal protection and, in some cases, health insurance as tangible benefits. Parents also reported that marriage made it easier for other people to understand their families. The common social understanding of marriage gave children a way to describe their parents' relationship to their friends and gave parents an understandable relationship to use in dealing with the institutions and people who affected their children's daily life. The most notable situation mentioned concerned children's schools, as well as other government agencies or family members. The importance of this sense of legal and social support for childrearing that marriage provides is probably most obvious from two respondents who reported that they would not have even decided to become parents without the support of marriage.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christopher Ramos is a Research Assistant at the Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. He studies social inequality through a lens of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

Naomi G. Goldberg, MPP, is the Peter J. Cooper Public Policy Fellow at the Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. Her research interests focus on policies affecting families.

M.V. Lee Badgett, PhD, is the Research Director at the Williams Institute, and Director of the Center for Public Policy and Administration at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst, where she is also a Professor of Economics. She studies family policy and employment discrimination related to sexual orientation.

For more information, contact:

The Williams Institute

UCLA School of Law

Box 951476

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1476

T (310)267-4382

F (310)825-7270

williamsinstitute@law.ucla.edu

www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute