

The Number of Children Being Raised by Gay or Lesbian Parents

Corbin Miller
Joseph Price

Brigham Young University

Abstract

We use data from the American Community Survey and National Survey of Family Growth to calculate the number of children being raised by either same-sex couples or gay or lesbian single parents. We estimate there are 190,000 children being raised by gay or lesbian couples, 83% of which are being raised by lesbian couples and 17% by gay couples. In addition, there are another 150,000 children being raised by a lesbian single parent and 60,000 being raised by a gay single parent. These estimates are significantly lower than previous estimates, to part, due the way in which parents who report being bisexual are categorized.

1. Introduction

Understanding the effect of different family structure types on child outcomes often requires a first step of accurately documenting the number of children living in that particular type of family. Examples of types of families that have been the focus of past research and public debate include single-parent families (Norton and Glick 1986, Bumpass and Sweet 1989.), cohabiting parents (Manning and Lichter 1996, Acs and Nelson 2002), step families (Glick 1989, Ehrle 2001), and three generational households. One of the most important current debates is related to the family is children being raised by lesbian or gay parents. This importance stems, in part, from the legal implications of current court cases involving the legal rights of same-sex couples and gay or lesbian parents.

We use data from the decennial census and the American Community Survey (ACS) to calculate the number of children who are being raised by same-sex couples. Gates and Steinberger (2009) note that estimates based on the Census data are likely to provide an over-count of children in these households because of the miscoding of some individual's gender. We use data from a variety of additional nationally representative datasets to confirm that the bias is not likely to be so large and that the number of children living in a household with same-sex parents is about 290,000.

One limitation of the Census data (and nearly every other nationally representative dataset in the U.S.) is that there is no measure of sexual orientation. Thus, the number of children being raised by same-sex couples does not include any children being raised by gay or lesbian single parents. We use data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which includes information about the respondent's sexual orientation and find that there are an additional 150,000 children living with a lesbian single parent and 60,000 living with gay single parent.

Thus the combination of children living with either same-sex parents or a single gay or lesbian parent is about 500,000, which is about four times smaller than recent studies that estimate the number of children with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) parent to be about 2 million (All Children Matter, 2011). The reason for the large difference in these two numbers is that the NSFG data on which the 2 million child estimate is based has a surprisingly large number of mothers and fathers who report being bisexual. In fact, there are more than 2.5 times as many bisexual mothers as lesbian mothers and 3 times as many bisexual fathers as gay fathers. We use additional questions from the NSFG to provide some insight into different ways to categorize this group of bisexual parents. We find that along most observable measures (gender of sexual partners, gender they are sexually attracted to, gender of current domestic partner) the majority of bisexual parents look more like heterosexual parents than gay parents.

2. Data

The total number of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents is a combination of children being raised by same-sex couples and children being raised by a single gay or lesbian parent. The number of children being raised by same-sex couples can be constructed using any nationally representative data that includes a household roster and information about the relationship between different individuals in the household. We use data from the American Community Survey for the years 2006-2010 which includes a combined total of 1,677,233 households with children under 18. A child is coded as being raised by a same-sex couple if the head of their household has a spouse or partner who is the same gender. To provide a comparison we also create categories for children living with opposite-sex cohabitating couples, opposite-sex

married couples, single fathers, and single mothers. For all of these groups, we exclude children in group quarters and any children age 18 or older.

One of the concerns about using Census data to calculate the number of same-sex couple households is that many couples that are recorded as having the same gender are actually heterosexual couples in which one individual's gender has been miscoded (Black et al. 2007). Since there are almost 200 times as many heterosexual couples as same-sex couples, even a small miscoding rate could significantly increase the number of same-sex couple households. In fact, Black et al (2007) estimate that in the 2000 Census, 47% of female same-sex couples and 43% of male same-sex couples are actually opposite-sex couples. We address the gender miscoding issue by estimating the fraction of children living with a same-sex couple using other nationally representative samples where the miscoding of the parent's gender is possibly less likely to occur.

The other nationally representative datasets that we use include The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), and General Social Survey (GSS). Since the fraction of children being raised by same-sex couples in the population is small, these other datasets, while large for normal research purposes, include only a small number of children being raised by same-sex couples. However, combined together they provide a reasonable check on our estimates based on the ACS data.

The other important measure of the number of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents are children being raised by a single gay or lesbian parent. This measure can only be calculated using data with information on the sexual orientation of the parent. The major limitation with constructing this measure is that there are very few large nationally representative

datasets that include information about sexual orientation. For example, The California Health Interview Survey is a large dataset with information on sexual orientation, but it only provides information for California

One of the few large nationally representative datasets that includes information on sexual orientation is the National Survey of Family Growth, a nationally representative sample of men and women ages 15-44. We use data from the most recent wave of the NSFG which was conducted from June 2006 to June 2010 and consists of interviews of 22,682 households, 9,388 of which contain children. Among the households with children, we use information about marital status of the respondent and whether or not a spouse or partner is present in the home to determine whether the respondent is a single, cohabiting, or married parent.

Information in the NSFG about sexual orientation is recorded using an Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (ACASI), which is designed to encourage respondents to answer truthfully without discomfort or embarrassment between themselves and the interviewer. The ACASI section also includes information about the respondent's sexual history and sexual attraction to each gender. For the sexual orientation question, individuals are asked if they consider themselves heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. For the sexual attraction measure, they are asked if they are attracted only to members of the opposite sex, mostly to members of the opposite sex, both genders equally, mostly to members of the same sex, or only to members of the same sex.

Similar information is available from the 2002 wave of the NSFG. However, we focus our analysis on the more recent wave of data because it better reflects the current situation in the country and also because there are a number of issues with the sexual orientation data in the 2002 data which seem problematic. First, sexual orientation was coded as heterosexual, bisexual,

homosexual, or “other”. In 2002 there were 561 men and women coded as “other”, which is about the same as the total number of reported gay, lesbian, or bisexual people combined. In 2006-2010 the number of men and women coded as other is only 79. Second, in the 2002 data, of 40 respondents with children in the household that reported being gay or lesbian, 16 reported being married to someone of the opposite sex and 22 were only attracted to members of the opposite sex. In the 2006-2010 wave, out of 54 parents who reported being gay or lesbian, only 6 reported being in an opposite-sex marriage and 8 were only attracted to the opposite sex.

3. Results

3.1 Same-sex Couples

We use data from the ACS for our estimates of the number of children being raised in same-sex households. As a comparison, we also include additional rows in the table to report the fraction of children being raised in other family structure types used in past research (Rosenfeld 2010, Gates 2008). The results in Table 1 show that of the over 3 million children in our sample, 0.23% of the children are living with a female same-sex couple and 0.16% are living with a male same-sex couple. Extrapolated to the total population of children in the U.S. this translates into about 290,000 children being raised by same-sex couples. This is very similar to estimate provided by Romero et al (2007) using the 2005 ACS data.

In the remaining columns in Table 1 we report the fraction of children living with a same-sex couple separately by the child’s age and gender. We find that younger children are just slightly more likely (9%) to be living with a female same-sex couple but there is no difference by age in the fraction of children living with a male same-sex couple. Dividing the sample based on

the child's gender suggests that girls are more than 70% more likely to live in a household with a female same-sex couple than a male same-sex couple, while the gap for boys is just 17%.

As mentioned earlier, there is some valid concerns about the degree to which gender miscoding in the Census data might cause us to overestimate the number of children who are living with same-sex couples. Black et al (2007) estimate that over 40% of same-sex couples in the 2000 Census may actually be opposite-sex couples that miscoded the gender of one of the spouses. There is not a natural way to apply their approach to the question of how much miscoding has occurred in households with children. Instead we construct similar estimates using information from six other nationally representative datasets which involve more detailed surveys of the respondents and for the gender miscoding might be less likely to occur.

In Table 2 we report the fraction of children being raised by either same-sex male or same-sex female parents along with the number of observations in each of the five nationally representative datasets. The last row of Table 2 then reports the weighted average of the estimates from these different datasets. The average fraction of children being raised by same-sex male parents in these studies is 0.06%. The cross-study weighted average fraction of children being raised by same-sex female parents is 0.29%. This indicates that the fraction of children being raised by same-sex male parents reported in the ACS might be 60% too large, while the fraction of same-sex female parents is closer to what we observe in the other nationally datasets.

3.2 Single Gay or Lesbian Parents

Any measure based only on household roster data will exclude any children who are being raised by a gay or lesbian parent who does not currently have a partner or spouse. Since the American Community Survey data does not include information on sexual orientation, we

use data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is one of the only nationally representative datasets with information about the respondent's sexual orientation, current household composition, and partner status. We use this information to allocate each respondent into one of five groups: same-sex couple, gay or lesbian single parent, heterosexual cohabiting couple, heterosexual married couple, or heterosexual single parent.

The NSFG is a sample of adults between the ages of 15-44 and the wave of the data that we are using (2006-2010) includes both male and female respondents. We limit our sample to just households that have at least one child under the age of 18 which gives a sample of 6,169 female respondents and 3,028 male respondents. We weight each household by the number of children under the age of 18 so that the fractions that we report for female respondents represent the fraction of children that are being raised by each family type among those households with at least one female parent, spouse, or partner (and similarly for male respondents). To make these measures comparable to the measures of the fraction of all children who are living in different family types we adjust for the fact that there are 15% more households with children that have at least one female adult than there are households with children with at least one male adult.

In Table 3, we show that among households in the NSFG with children, 0.22% are headed by a female same-sex couple and 0.07% are headed by a male same-sex couple. We find an additional 0.45% of households are headed by a lesbian single parent and 0.20% are headed by a gay single parent. We find similar results when we weight each household observation using the number of children in the household. Based on the data, 0.19% of children are being raised by a lesbian couple and 0.04% by a gay couple. Additionally, 0.40% of children are being raised by a lesbian single parent and 0.13% by a gay single parent. These results indicate that 61% of

children being raised by gay or lesbian parents are being raised by a single parent (compared to 36% of children being raised by parents who do not report being gay or lesbian).

This suggests that using data without information on sexual orientation will dramatically understate the number of children being raised by a gay or lesbian parent. These numbers also indicate that children being raised by a gay or lesbian parent are about 70% more likely to have a single parent than children being raised a heterosexual parent. Applying the fraction of children being raised by a single lesbian or gay parent that we estimate using the NSFG data to the total population of children suggests that there are about 150,000 children being raised by a lesbian single parent, and 60,000 children being raised by a gay single parent. Combining this with the 290,000 children being raised by same-sex couples that we estimated from the previous sections suggests that there are about 500,000 children being raised by gay or lesbian parents.

3.3 Bisexual Parents

Our estimate that there are 500,000 children currently being raised by either a same-sex couple or a gay or lesbian single parent is much less than a recent estimate of 2 million (All Children Matter, 2011) which was based on the same data that we are using in this paper. The main reason for the large difference is that there are a large number of parents who report being bisexual in the NSFG data. In fact, in the 2006-2010 wave of the data there are 3.25% of mothers that report being bisexual (more than 7 times the 0.46% that report being lesbian). Among fathers, there are 4.4 times as many men that report that they are bisexual then those that report being gay.

Since parents who report being bisexual constitute such a large fraction of the LGBT group in the NSFG data, we use some of the additional questions from the NSFG to provide

insight into their characteristics. Table 4 reports the characteristics of bisexual parents in terms of family structure type, sexual attraction, and sexual history. We also construct a composite measure for reported bisexuality, which identifies individuals who would be considered bisexual across all observable characteristics. To be considered bisexual by this measure someone must report bisexual as their sexual orientation, report that they are both attracted to members of the same and opposite sex, and have had both opposite and same gender sexual experiences.

In both waves of the NSFG, around 50% of male and female bisexual respondents report currently being in an opposite-sex relationship. An additional 40–50 % of bisexual respondents report being single parents, with only 2.6% of female bisexuals and 3.7% in a same-sex relationship. In addition, very few of the bisexual respondents report being mostly or only attracted to individuals of their own gender (4% of female bisexuals and 11% of male bisexuals).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we use data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Survey of Family Growth to calculate the number of children who are being raised by either same-sex couples or gay or lesbian single parents. We find that altogether there are about 415,000 children being raised in one of these family structure types, with 169,000 being raised by same-sex lesbian couples, 31,000 being raised by same-sex gay couples, 154,000 being raised by lesbian single parents, and 61,000 being raised by gay single parents.

These numbers highlight a few natural points. First, the fraction of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents is a very small fraction of children in the U.S. (about 1%), which is about 7 times smaller than children being raised by single fathers or 24 times smaller than children being raised by single mothers. As such, the ability to study this group using normal

nationally representative datasets will continue to be difficult unless the samples used in datasets like AddHealth or ECLS are dramatically increased or there are efforts to oversample children being raised by gay or lesbian parents.

Second, although the majority of children in same-sex households are being raised by lesbian parents, there is still a sizable fraction being raised by gay parents. This is in contrast to the fact that most of the studies about the outcomes of children being raised by same-sex couples have focused on children being raised in lesbian households (Rosenfeld 2010). The results in this paper, suggest that studies about the outcomes of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents should be sure to include more children being raised by gay parents in their sample.

Finally, reports about the number of children being raised by LGBT parents can provide a misleading picture of the number of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents. Since much of the current research and legal and policy discussions are related gay or lesbian parents, it is probably important that this distinction be made when discussing the number of children being raised in different family structure types. This is especially true since very little of the research or discussion is about bisexual parents and also because it seems that many of the parents who report being bisexual look much more similar to heterosexual parents than they do to gay or lesbian parents in terms of current living situation or sexual attraction.

References

- Acs, G. and Nelson, S. (2002). The kids are alright? Children's well-being and the rise in cohabitation. *The Urban Institute: Series B, No. B-48*.
- Akerlof, G., Yellen, J., and Katz, M. (1996). An analysis of out-of-wedlock childbearing in the united states. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 111(2): 277-317.
- Amato, P., and Bruce, K. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: a meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 110(1): 26-46.
- Andersson, G., Noack, T., Seierstad, A., and Weedon-Fekjær, H. (2006). The demographics of same-sex marriages in Norway and Sweden. *Demography*, 43(1): 79-98.
- Black, D., Gates, G., Sanders, S., and Taylor, L. (2007). The measurement of same-sex unmarried partner couples in the 2000 U.S. Census. *On-Line Working Paper Series, California Center for Population Research, UC Los Angeles*. Accessed at www.escholarship.org/uc/item/72r1q94b on 7/13/12.
- Bumpass, L., and Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children family contexts in the united states. *Population Studies* 54(1): 29-41.
- Bumpass, L., and Sweet, J. (1989). Children's experience in single-parent families: implications of cohabitation and marital transitions. *Family Planning Perspectives* 21(6): 256-260.
- Bumpass, L., Raley, R.K., and Sweet, J. (1995). The changing character of stepfamilies: implications of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing. *Demography* 32(3): 425-436.
- Ehrle, J., Green, R., and Clark, R. (2001). Children cared for by relatives: who are they and how are they faring? *Assessing the New Federalism Policy Brief*. Washington, D.C.: *The Urban Institute*.
- Ellwood, D.T., and Jencks, C. (2004). The spread of single-parent families in the united states since 1960. *KSG Working Paper No. RWP04-008*.
- Eloundou-Enyegue, P.M., and Stokes, C.S. (2007). Demographic transitions and children's resources: bonus or divergence? *Demographic Research* 16(7): 195-218.
<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol16/7/> DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2007.16.7.
- Gates, G., and Steinberger, M. (2009). 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*.

- Gruber, J., Levine, P., and Staiger, D. (1999). Abortion legalization and child living circumstances: who is the 'marginal child'? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114(1): 263-291.
- Glick, P. (1989). Remarried families, stepfamilies, and stepchildren: a brief demographic profile. *Family Relations* 38(1): 24-27.
- Manning, W., and Lichter, D. (1996). Parental cohabitation and children's economic well-being. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58: 998-1010.
- Norton, A.J., and Glick, P.C. (1986). One parent families: a social and economic profile. *Family Relations* 35(1): 9-17.
- Reneflot, A. (2006). A gender perspective on preferences for marriage among cohabitating couples. *Demographic Research* 15(10): 311-328. <http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol15/10/> DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2006.15.10.
- Romero, Adam., Baumle, Amanda, Badgett, M. V. Lee., & Gates, Gary. (2007). *Census snapshot: United States*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute.
- Rosenfeld, M.J. (2010). Nontraditional families and childhood progress through school. *Demography* 47(3): 755-775.
- Santelli, J., Carter, M., Orr, M., and Dittus, P. (2009). Trends in sexual risk behaviors, by nonsexual risk behavior involvement, U.S. high school students, 1991-2007. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 44: 372-379.
- Tye, M. (2003). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents: special considerations for the custody and adoption evaluator. *Family Court Review* 41(1): 92-103.
- Wainright, J., Russell, S., and Patterson, C. (2004). Psychosocial adjustment, school outcomes, and romantic relationships of adolescents with same-sex parents. *Child Development* 75(6): 1886-1898.

Table 1. Fraction of children living in each family structure type (2006-2010)

Family Structure	All Children	Child's age		Child's Gender	
		<10	10-17	Boys	Girls
Same-Sex Female Couple	0.23%	0.24%	0.22%	0.21%	0.24%
Same-Sex Male Couple	0.16%	0.16%	0.16%	0.18%	0.14%
Heterosexual Cohabiting Couple	5.14%	6.60%	4.02%	5.15%	5.13%
Heterosexual Married Couple	76.27%	77.08%	74.22%	76.36%	76.18%
Single Mother	15.44%	13.84%	17.75%	15.15%	15.75%
Single Father	2.76%	2.07%	3.63%	2.95%	2.56%
Observations	3,107,894	1,675,785	1,511,316	1,592,008	1,515,886

Notes: The data is based on all children under the age of 18 from the 2006-2010 waves of the American Community Survey (ACS) who do not live in a group quarters.

Table 2. Fraction of children being raised by same-sex couples in various nationally representative datasets.

Data Set (Years)	Female same-sex couples	Male same-sex couples	Sample size
NELS (1988)	0.28%	0.16%	12,144
NHLS (1992)	0.40%	0.12%	3,432
Add Health (1994-1995)	0.37%	0.05%	12,105
ECLS (1998)	0.34%	0.03%	19,107
GSS (2008-2010)	0.38%	0.05%	8,577
Weighted Average	0.29%	0.06%	66,651

Notes: The numbers for the Add Health survey are taken from Wainwright et al (2004). All other estimates were created by the authors. The weighted average takes into account the size of the surveys. The last column is the number of children in each dataset. The GSS data is weighted by the number of children that the respondent has.

Table 3. Fraction of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents.

Family Structure	NSFG (2006-2010)			GSS (2008-2010)		
	Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
Same-Sex Couple	0.19%	0.04%	0.12%	0.53%	0.13%	0.34%
Gay/Lesbian Single Parent	0.20%	0.08%	0.14%	0.15%	0.00%	0.08%
Opposite-Sex Cohabiting	12.04%	17.06%	14.37%	12.34%	16.62%	14.33%
Opposite-Sex Married	63.11%	75.64%	68.94%	50.87%	71.13%	60.29%
Heterosexual Single Parent	24.46%	7.17%	16.42%	36.12%	12.11%	24.95%
Observations	12,293	5,989		1,329	776	

Notes: The overall rate is a weighted average of the children in households with a female or male respondents that takes into account that there are 15% more households with children with at least one female adult than there are household with children with at least one male adult (based on column 1 in Table 1).

Table 4. Characteristics of respondents who report bisexual as their sexual orientation (NSFG 2006 – 2010)

	Female			Male		
	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Lesbian	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Gay
<u>Family Structure Type:</u>						
Opposite-Sex Married/Cohabiting	60.22%	48.50%	9.09%	83.95%	59.26%	20.00%
Single	37.39%	48.93%	63.64%	14.34%	37.04%	20.00%
Same-Sex Cohabiting	2.39%	2.58%	27.27%	1.71%	3.70%	60.00%
<u>Attracted to:</u>						
Only Opposite-Sex	89.21%	4.72%	11.36%	96.49%	25.93%	30.00%
Mostly Opposite-Sex	9.01%	37.77%	2.27%	2.94%	33.33%	0.00%
Males/Females Equally	0.90%	50.21%	2.27%	0.10%	22.22%	0.00%
Mostly Same-Sex	0.00%	4.29%	29.55%	0.03%	7.41%	40.00%
Only Same-Sex	0.15%	0.00%	47.73%	0.03%	0.00%	30.00%
Missing	0.73%	3.00%	6.82%	0.40%	11.11%	0.00%
<u>Sexual History:</u>						
All sexual partners have been opposite-sex	89.48%	15.45%	13.64%	95.79%	33.33%	30.00%
Both opposite and same sex partners	2.61%	9.01%	0.00%	2.91%	55.56%	30.00%
All sexual partners have been same-sex	0.00%	0.43%	0.00%	0.00%	7.41%	40.00%
No sexual partners	0.70%	0.43%	0.00%	1.14%	3.70%	0.00%
Missing	7.21%	74.68%	86.36%	0.17%	0.00%	0.00%
Observations	5,892	223	44	2,991	27	10