

Abstract

“The Development of Children of Same-Sex Couples”

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Research Outline

This project will examine outcomes for children of same-sex couples, compared to children of other parental structures. The main focus of the project will be to evaluate and improve scientific knowledge regarding how same-sex unions affect youth outcomes. I propose to carry out (in several stages) a comprehensive analysis of same-sex couples and their children from the U.S. census (1990 and 2000), from the Current Population Survey (CPS, 1995-present), and from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health, all waves), because these are the nationally representative surveys with the largest sample sizes, and therefore the largest numbers of same-sex couples and their children. Given the rancorous public policy debate over same-sex marriage in the US, high quality scientific evidence about same-sex couples and their families is especially important.

1) Years 1-2, Inventory Available Data. I am already familiar with the data on same sex couples in the census, the CPS, and in Add Health, as well as the General Social Survey and the National Health and Social Life Survey. Many other nationally representative household survey datasets exist, however, and most of them have never been used to study gays or lesbians. I will inventory the availability of gay and lesbian respondents and their children in each of the extant nationally representative datasets, and publish a report on this data availability for other scholars. It is a testament to how quickly the available data about same-sex couples has grown that the best and most comprehensive review of gays and lesbians from national datasets, Black et al (2000) is already quite out of date.

2) Years 1-2, Profile Same-Sex Parenthood. I will use the US census to describe the demographics of parenthood among same-sex couples. Same-sex couples are substantially less likely to have children than heterosexual married couples are. The determinants of parenthood among same-sex couples have never been studied with nationally representative data. The massive sample size of the US census, and the resulting large sample of same-sex couples (numbering 32,364 in the 2000 census 5% microdata) and their children (numbering 21,229 in the 2000 microdata) allow for a new kind of analysis of same-sex couple headed families.

3) Years 2-3, Grade Retention. To study grade retention as an outcome for children of same-sex cohabiters and other types of families, using the October supplements for the CPS, and also the 1990 and 2000 censuses. I will examine whether children of same-sex couples are more or less likely than children in other types of families to be left behind in school, first with simple bivariate measures, and then with multivariate measures controlling for other factors such as race, income, geography, family size, parents' educational attainment, parental unemployment, and English proficiency.

4) Years 2-4, Add Health. To study psychological, educational, social, health, and sexual outcomes for 288 children in Add Health whose parents were gay or lesbian, and compare these outcomes to children of heterosexual couples. To the extent that there may be differences between children of same-sex couples and children of heterosexual couples on certain outcomes, the object will be to determine which if any of the demographic differences between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples 'explain' the differences in adolescent outcomes.

5) Years 2-5, Theoretical Overview. The ultimate goal of the project is to provide new insights into how family structure affects children. Same-sex unions are different from divorced families (the family structure most studied in the past two decades) in that same-sex unions are not necessarily the result of failed heterosexual marriages, but rather same-sex unions are an autonomous, alternative family form. Because same-sex unions do not necessarily represent failures of heterosexual marriages, the issues of selection into same-sex couple status are different from the issues of selection into divorce and remarriage.

6) Years 3-5, Piloting Questions for a Future Study. The final phase of my project anticipates improving the available data on same-sex couples and their children by piloting questions to a small sample of respondents in preparation for a new data gathering project.

Background:

State and federal legislatures argue that rights cannot be granted to same-sex couples until their suitability as parents has been confirmed (Eskridge 2002; Koppelman 2002). Yet there has never been a comprehensive study of same-sex parents and their children from nationally representative data; the time for such a study has come. My recent research on the history of the family and the rise of nontraditional unions puts me in a unique position to undertake this study (Rosenfeld 2006; Rosenfeld forthcoming; Rosenfeld and Kim 2005).

The studies that have been done on same-sex couples and their children have mostly been small scale studies of non-random samples from sampling frames that are not nationally representative. Traditionally, researchers have gathered their own samples of same-sex couples and of comparison families, usually (because of cost and time constraints) with fewer than 100 same-sex couples in the sample (Chan, Raboy and Patterson 1998; Flaks et al. 1995; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Patterson 1995; Stacey and Biblarz 2001). The literature on same-sex couples has usually argued that no differences in child adjustment can be found between children raised by heterosexual married couples and children raised by same-sex couples (Baumrind 1995; Patterson 2002). Opponents of same-sex marriage have decried this literature on same-sex couples and their children as fundamentally unsound for several reasons, including the objection that small sample sizes and non-random sampling in extant studies would prevent researchers from identifying differences between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples even if such differences did exist (Ball and Pea 1998; Wardle 1997). The availability of nationally representative samples of same-sex couples and their children from the US census, the CPS, and Add Health make it possible for researchers to examine these questions in a new way.

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