

GEOGRAPHIC TRENDS AMONG SAME-SEX COUPLES IN THE U.S. CENSUS AND THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research brief analyzes geographic trends among same-sex couples using the 1990 and 2000 United States decennial census enumerations along with data from the 2002 through 2006 American Community Surveys. Key findings include:

- **The number of same-sex couples reporting themselves as “unmarried partners” has quintupled since 1990 from 145,000 to nearly 780,000.**
- **The number of same-sex couples increased 21 times faster than the U.S. population from 1990 to 2006.**
- **The biggest increases from 1990 to 2006 were in Southern and Mountain states.**
 - East South Central states of Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee saw a combined increase of 863%.
 - Mountain states of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada and Idaho had an increase of 698%.
- **Top 10 rankings of states and cities by concentration of same-sex couples (same-sex couples per 1000 households) have remained quite stable comparing 1990, 2000 and 2006.** But there have been a few big movers:
 - Utah has moved from the lower third of states in 1990 to the upper third in 2006 (38th to 14th).
 - Delaware has gone from 33rd to 12th.
 - New Mexico from 16th to 2nd.
- **Same-sex couples appear to be moving to the suburbs in some cities.**
 - Only three cities (among the 50 largest) showed decreases in same-sex couples from 2000 to 2006: Atlanta, Philadelphia and Detroit. In all cases the cities lost same-sex couples while surrounding counties showed large gains.
- **Two important factors contribute to regional increases in same-sex couples**
 - **Coming out:** National polls since the early 1990s clearly demonstrate an increased acceptance of lesbian and gay people and same-sex couples in the U.S. population. This acceptance results in increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men being more forthcoming about their sexual orientation and living arrangements in surveys.
 - **Mobility and migration:** To a lesser extent, differences in increases in same-sex couples among regions result from lesbians and gay men moving in ways that differ from the movement of the general population.

- **An indication that coming out played a large role in the increases in same-sex couples is that socially conservative areas experienced the largest increases.**

In short, the regions with the most room for growth in terms of social acceptance also experienced the largest increases in same-sex couples.

- For example, in analyses of results from the 1992 U.S. presidential election, regions where support for Republican Presidential candidate George H.W. Bush was above the national average all had above average percentage increases in same-sex couples in the years that followed.
 - Regions where Democratic candidate Bill Clinton's support was above the national average all had percentage increases in same-sex couples that were below the national average.
- **In addition, states barring legal acceptance of same-sex couples had larger percentage increases in same-sex couples from 2000 to 2006.**
 - From 2000 to 2006, states that banned same-sex marriage had increases in same-sex couples of 37%, exceeding the national pace of 31%.
 - Places that actually had voter referendums had even larger increases of 41%.
 - Places with no bans had an increase of 27%, below the national average.
 - Conversely, states that created formal recognition of SS couples had the lowest average percentage increases in same-sex couples of 23%.
- **Same-sex couple regional migration patterns do not differ from broader national migration patterns: people are generally moving south and west.**
 - Midwest, Southern, New England and Mid-Atlantic regional same-sex couple increases far outpaced population growth, suggesting that "coming out" played a larger role than migration in explaining same-sex couple increases.
 - Same-sex couple increases were 55 times larger than population increases in the Upper Midwest (Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin)
 - Similar increases in other regions include:
 - 51 times larger in East South Central states
 - 49 times larger in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont)
 - 48 times larger in the Mid-Atlantic states (New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania)
 - 46 times larger in the Central Midwest (Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota and Missouri)
 - Migration plays a larger role in explaining same-sex couple increases in Mountain and Western states where the pace was closer to that of population increases.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), it is no longer necessary to wait every ten years for the decennial census to consider how the numbers of same-sex couples and their geographic distribution might be changing across the country. This is very good news to policy makers who want to assess the impact of policies relating to sexual orientation. Census same-sex couple counts are routinely used in this manner.¹ Economic development professionals and marketers also frequently track the movements of the lesbian and gay community, a group they see as an important and growing consumer constituency.²

This research brief analyzes geographic trends among same-sex couples using the 1990 and 2000 United States decennial census enumerations along with data from the 2002 through 2006 American Community Surveys. Much of the analyses will explore changes in the geographic distribution of same-sex couples at three points in time: 1990, 2000 and 2006.

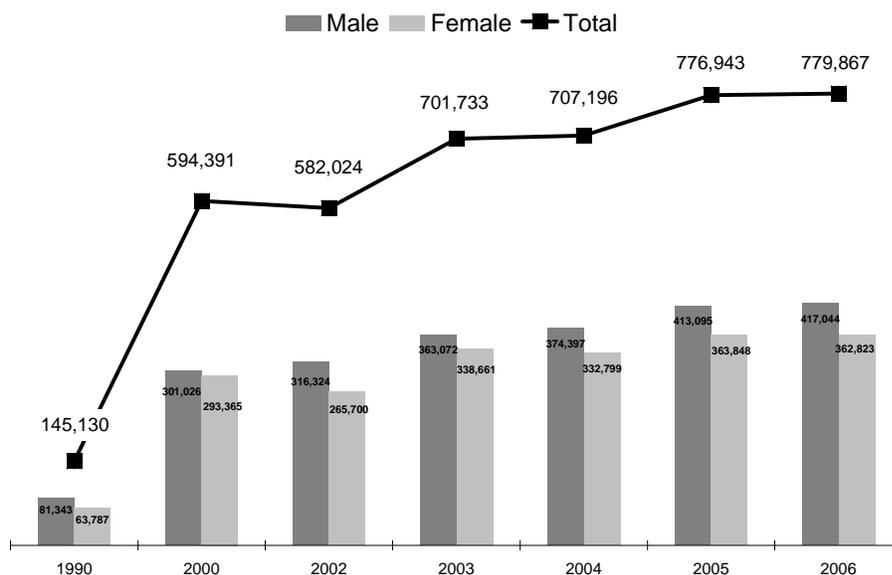
CHANGES IN SAME-SEX COUPLE COUNTS, 1990 TO 2006

As of 2006, there are an estimated 779,867 same-sex couples in the United States. The most recent estimates suggest that 53.5% of couples (417,044) are male while 46.5% (362,823) are female.

Same-sex couple counts quintupled since 1990

These figures reflect a 437% increase since 1990 when the Census counted 145,130 couples. This percentage increase far exceeds the U.S. population increase of 20% for the same period. The steady increases in the number of same-sex couples counted by the Census Bureau from 1990 to 2006 are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Same-sex couples in the United States, 1990 to 2006



¹ See Congressional Budget Office (2004) and Badgett and Sears (2005) as two examples of research using Census information about same-sex couples to estimate fiscal impacts for extending marriage rights.

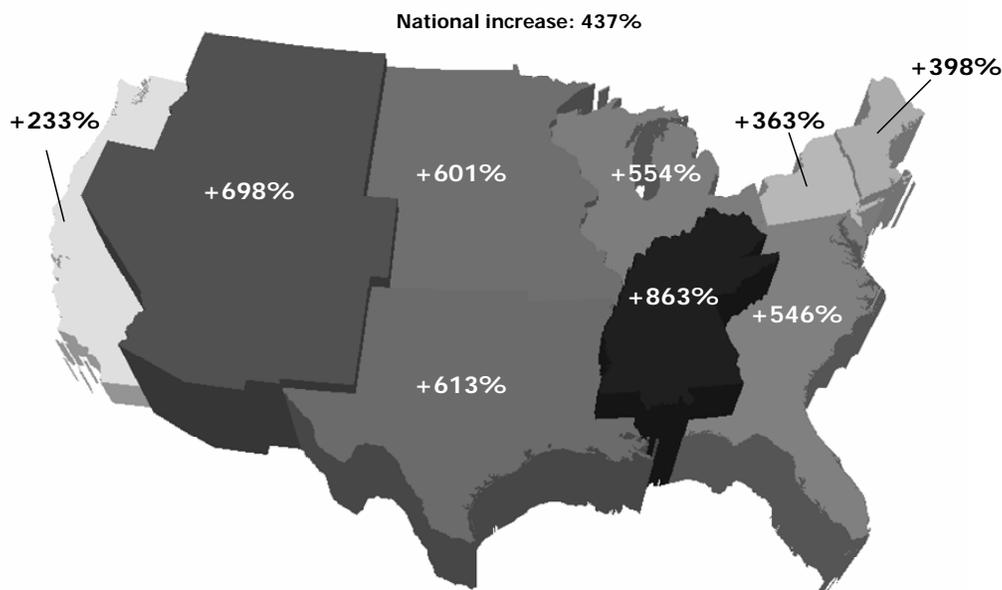
² Authors like Richard Florida (2004) have touted the benefits of gay-tolerant communities to broader economic health. In addition, authors like Bob Witeck and Wes Combs (2006) argue that the GLBT community is an important and growing consumer market.

Increases are highest in the South, Mountain and Midwest regions

The increases in the number of same-sex couples are not uniform across the country. A report summarizing changes in the number of same-sex couples from 2000 to 2005 showed large increases among states in more socially conservative parts of the country like the Midwest (Gates 2006). The map in Figure 2 shows that these increases were a continuation of patterns dating back to at least 1990.

The largest increases in the number of same-sex couples from 1990 to 2000 occurred in Southern, Mountain and Midwestern states, where percentage increases all exceeded the national rate. In New England, Middle Atlantic and West Coast states, the percentage increases were lower than the national rate.

Figure 2. Percentage increase in the number of same-sex couples, 1990 to 2006



Rankings of states and cities by the concentration of same-sex couples are fairly consistent over time

While increases in the number of same-sex couples have not been very uniform across the country, the rankings of states and cities by the concentration of same-sex couples (measured as the number of same-sex couples per thousand households) have remained consistent (see Table 1).

Six states — Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, California, Washington and Oregon — have held positions in the top 10 of states according to same-sex couple concentration in 1990, 2000 and a mid-decade 2004-2006 average.³ Vermont holds the top spot in both 2000 and in the mid-decade 2004-2006 average. Newcomers to this top 10 ranking include New Hampshire, Colorado and Rhode Island.

Nine cities have appeared among the top 10 in the concentration of same-sex couples (among the 50 largest cities in 2006) in each of the three rankings. San Francisco and Seattle rank first and second in each time period. Others consistently in the top ten include Portland, Oregon; Seattle; Boston; Oakland, California; Minneapolis; Washington, D.C.; Long Beach, California; and Atlanta.

³ ACS sample sizes are still relatively small compared to the Census. As a result, single-year rankings of both states and cities can vary substantially. To adjust for this variability, the findings from Table 6 show an average from three years, 2004, 2005 and 2006.

Table 1. Top 10 states and cities (among the fifty largest in 2006) ranked by the number of same-sex couples per thousand households in 1990, 2000 and the mid-decade 2004-2006 average.

Rank	1990		2000		Mid-decade average (2004-2006)	
		Same-sex couples per thousand households		Same-sex couples per thousand households		Same-sex couples per thousand households
	United States	1.58		5.64		6.81
1	California	3.52	Vermont	8.03	Vermont	9.71
2	Washington	2.32	California	8.01	New Mexico	9.03
3	Massachusetts	2.31	Washington	7.00	Massachusetts	8.99
4	New York	2.07	Massachusetts	7.00	Washington	8.94
5	Oregon	2.05	Oregon	6.70	Oregon	8.83
6	Minnesota	1.85	New Mexico	6.63	New Hampshire	8.73
7	Vermont	1.76	Nevada	6.62	Maine	8.57
8	Maine	1.75	New York	6.59	California	8.50
9	Maryland	1.73	Maine	6.55	Colorado	7.79
10	Arizona	1.70	Arizona	6.49	Rhode Island	7.63
1	San Francisco	22.28	San Francisco	27.00	San Francisco	28.72
2	Seattle	10.10	Seattle	19.21	Seattle	21.27
3	Oakland	9.08	Oakland	17.57	Minneapolis	18.68
4	Minneapolis	8.92	Atlanta	16.85	Portland, OR	16.94
5	Washington, DC	8.89	Minneapolis	16.15	Sacramento	16.36
6	Boston	7.76	Washington, DC	14.81	Oakland	15.62
7	Long Beach	7.51	Long Beach	13.89	Boston	14.72
8	Atlanta	6.93	Portland, OR	13.48	Washington, DC	13.49
9	Sacramento	6.34	Boston	13.11	Atlanta	13.32
10	Portland, OR	5.60	Denver	12.19	Long Beach	12.80

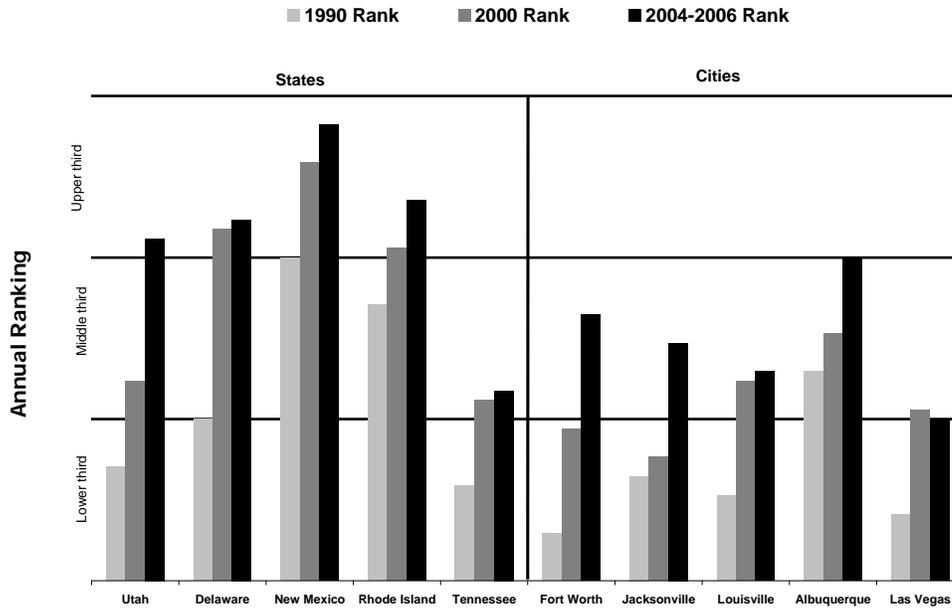
Given that such large increases in same-sex couples have occurred outside of states and cities not known for having high concentrations of these couples, the persistence of the state and city rankings may seem surprising. But this fact perhaps explains some of the persistence. Since most change is occurring outside of states and cities with high concentrations of same-sex couples, the rankings of the high concentration states and cities have remained relatively stable.

Changes in the “middle” of the rankings provide evidence that the top-ranked states and cities might not be stable for much longer. States and cities from Southern and Mountain regions are prominent among those with the largest movement upwards from the 1990 to the 2004-2006 mid-decade rankings (see Figure 3).

Perhaps most striking is the movement of Utah from a ranking of 38th in 1990 to 14th in 2004-2006. Like Utah, Delaware moved from the bottom third of states, ranking 33rd in 1990, to the upper third, at 12th, in the 2004-2006 rankings. Mountain state New Mexico moved from 16th to 2nd.

Among the fifty largest cities, those with the biggest change in rankings all come from the South: Fort Worth, Texas; Jacksonville, Florida; and Louisville, Kentucky. Each moved from the lower third to mid-level rankings.

Figure 3. States and cities (among the 50 largest in 2006) with the largest changes in ranking of same-sex couple concentration from 1990 to the 2004-2006 mid-decade average.



Same-sex couples are moving from cities to suburbs

Among the fifty largest cities in the United States, only six experienced a statistically significant change in the number of same-sex couples from 2000 to 2006 (see Table 2). Notably, in both Detroit and Philadelphia, that change was downward, with losses of 59% and 33%, respectively. That means that same-sex couple decreases were five to seven times that of the general population change in these two cities. Atlanta also saw a decline in same-sex couples in this period (down 43%), but did so while still experiencing a population increase of 6%.

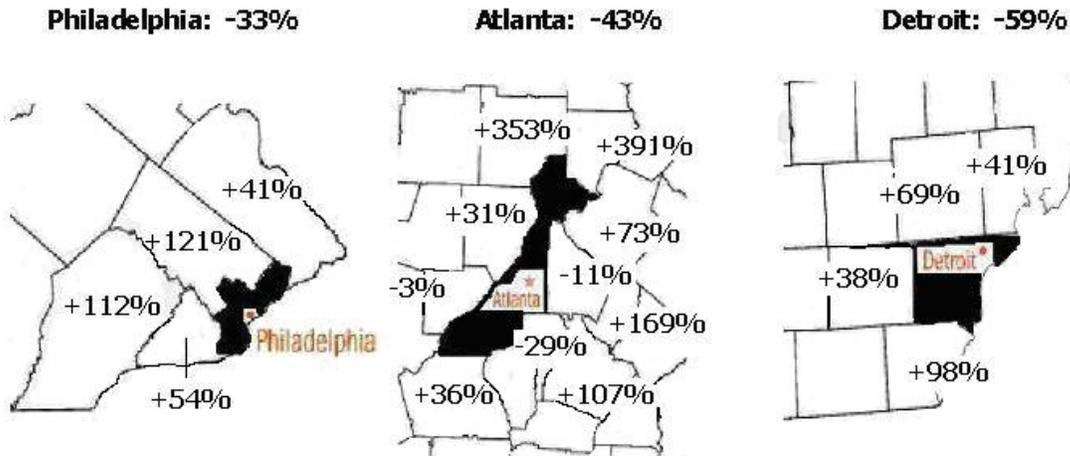
Louisville experienced the largest percentage increase in same-sex couples at 151%, but that increase is likely a result of similar rapid population growth of 118%. San Antonio saw its same-sex couple population increase by 63%, roughly six times its population growth. Those figures pale compared to Portland, Oregon, where the 45% increase in same-sex couples outpaced population growth by a factor of 22 times.

Table 2. Cities, among the 50 largest in the United States in 2006, with a statistically significant increase in same-sex couples from 2000 to 2006.

	% change in same-sex couples, 2000 to 2006	% change in population, 2000 to 2006	Rate of same-sex couple increase/decrease relative to population increase/decrease
Same-sex couple decrease/Population increase			
Atlanta	-43%	6%	-
Same-sex couple decrease/Population decrease			
Detroit	-59%	-12%	5
Philadelphia	-33%	-5%	7
Same-sex couple increase/Population increase			
Louisville/Jefferson County, KY	151%	118%	1
San Antonio	63%	11%	6
Portland	45%	2%	22

In exploring the decreases in city-level counts further, the maps in Figure 4 demonstrate that the decreases are not necessarily a flight of same-sex couples from the region. They could reflect a movement from central city areas to more-suburban adjacent counties. While the number of same-sex couples in the central cities has declined, all three of these broader metropolitan areas have still experienced an increase. Correspondingly, in each of the three cities where the number of same-sex couples declined, the counties surrounding the city generally show large increases in same-sex couples which tend to offset decreases in the central cities.

Figure 4. Percent change in the number of same-sex couples from 2000 to 2005 in counties surrounding Philadelphia, Atlanta and Detroit



WHY INCREASES IN THE NUMBER OF SAME-SEX COUPLES?

Several factors likely contribute to growth in the number of same-sex “unmarried partners” counted in U.S. Census Bureau tabulations. These factors could also explain different patterns across states and cities.

Census Bureau tabulation procedures have changed over time

Some of the changes from 1990 to 2000 are likely a result of differences in how the U.S. Census Bureau enumerated same-sex unmarried partner couples. In 1990, only same-sex couples where one partner was identified as the unmarried partner of the other were included in the counts. In Census 2000 and ACS enumerations, same-sex couples also include those where one same-sex partner is identified as a “husband” or “wife” of the other partner. As a result of these procedures, the counts since 2000 include some couples who are excluded from the 1990 enumeration. Unfortunately, the Census Bureau does not provide a mechanism to separate same-sex “unmarried partners” from same-sex spouses to allow for an assessment of how much this change affects the counts. It is important to note that the tabulation procedures are consistent in the Census 2000 counts and the American Community Survey counts since then.

More lesbians and gay men are coming out

National polls since the early 1990s demonstrate an increased acceptance of lesbian and gay people and same-sex couples in the U.S. population.⁴ It is likely that this acceptance results in increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men being more forthcoming about their sexual orientation and living arrangements in surveys. In analyses from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey, approximately 3.2% of men and 1.6% of women aged 18-49 identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual.⁵ Ten years later, the National Survey of Family Growth found that 4.1% of both men and women aged 18-44 identified as either homosexual or bisexual (Mosher et al., 2006). In the course of ten years, men became 1.3 times more likely to call themselves gay or bisexual, while women were nearly three times more likely to do so. This trend could explain a large portion of the increases in same-sex couples. As more gay and lesbian people come out, they are more willing to identify their same-sex spouses or unmarried partners on government surveys.

More lesbians and gay men may be choosing to couple and cohabit

The increased social acceptance of lesbians and gay men could also mean that more are choosing to couple and cohabit together. Broader social support could also result in longer duration relationships among lesbians and gay men. Unfortunately, good data to document historical changes in the rates of coupling and cohabitation and duration of relationships among lesbians and gay men are not available, but such changes may contribute to increased numbers of same-sex couples observed in the Census and ACS. However, even massive changes in coupling rates over time could not account for the magnitude of increases in same-sex couples since 1990.

Lesbian and gay mobility patterns across states and cities may differ from the general population

The increases — and occasional decreases — in the number of same-sex couples across states and cities are not uniform. Some areas gain substantially more than others. Differential changes among regions may reflect differences in the numbers of lesbians and gay men coming out and differences in coupling and cohabitation rates. But they could also result from lesbians and gay men moving to and from states

⁴ In 1988, a Gallup poll found that only 33% of Americans thought that homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal. By 2007, that figure had increased to 59%. See <http://www.gallupoll.com/content/?ci=27694> (accessed 5 July 2007)

⁵ Laumann et al. 1994 reports of sexual orientation by age categories in Table 8.2 (p. 305) and reports the sample age distribution in Table B.2 (p. 576). The sexual orientation figures reported are a weighted average using information from these two tables and assume similar age distributions for men and women (separate distributions are not reported).

and cities in ways that differ from the movement of the general population. Supportive or restrictive laws relating to partnership recognition, child-rearing and discrimination could affect the mobility decisions of lesbians and gay men.

SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE, COMING OUT AND MIGRATION

The analyses now shift to a focus on assessing how social acceptance and accompanying coming out in the lesbian and gay population, versus migration and mobility among same-sex couples explain variances in regional increases in the same-sex couple population.

Regions with lower social acceptance had bigger “closets”

Social acceptance of lesbians and gay men could play an important factor in explaining increases in same-sex couples. Places with lower levels of acceptance of homosexuality in the early 1990s no doubt had larger portions of lesbians and gay men who were not open about their sexual orientation and perhaps not willing to cohabit openly even if they were coupled. Effectively, these areas had relatively larger “closets.” With more ground to cover in terms of increases in social acceptance, one would expect that relatively large changes in social climate produce similarly large increases in the counts of same-sex couples, especially when compared to areas with higher initial levels of social acceptance.

To consider this factor, Table 3 shows results from the 1992 U.S. presidential election for each region along with percentage increases in same-sex couples primarily from the years after the election, from 1990 to 2006. Areas that support Republican candidates are generally more socially conservative while those supporting Democrats tend to be more socially liberal. In 1992, Democrat Bill Clinton’s margin of victory over Republican George H.W. Bush was at or below the national margin in all of the regions where percentage increases in same-sex couples exceeded the national average. Conversely, the Clinton margin of victory far exceeded the national vote in the three regions where same-sex couple increases were the lowest. This adds support to the notion that the largest increases in the visibility of same-sex couples are occurring in the nation’s more conservative regions, where general acceptance of lesbian and gay individuals and couples is likely a more recent phenomenon.

Table 3. U.S. regions ranked by the percentage increase in same-sex couples from 1990 to 2006.

	% increase in same-sex couples, 1990 to 2006	Clinton margin over George H.W. Bush, 1992 election
United States	437%	6%
East South Central: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee	863%	-1%
Mountain: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming	698%	-2%
West South Central: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas	613%	-1%
Central Midwest: Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota, Missouri	601%	3%
Upper Midwest: Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin	554%	6%
South Atlantic: Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia	546%	2%
New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont	398%	13%
Middle Atlantic: New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania	363%	11%
Pacific: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington	233%	12%

States barring legal acceptance of same-sex couples had larger percentage increases in same-sex couples

The period from 2000 to 2006 has been active in terms of public policy debates about same-sex couples and recognition of their relationships. Seven states and the District of Columbia have enacted some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples.⁶ Conversely, 26 states have added amendments to their state constitutions that define marriage as between a man and a woman. Of those states, 24 of the amendments were enacted as a result of a statewide vote.

By comparing differences in the rate of increase in the counts of same-sex couples based on enactment of various policies, the findings in Table 5 more directly confirm the pattern that areas that are less accepting (at least legally) of lesbian and gay couples have experienced larger increases.

⁶ In 2000, California established a statewide domestic partner registry for same-sex couples and progressively added rights and responsibilities akin to marriage. The District of Columbia, Maine and New Jersey established registries later in the decade. Washington established a registry in 2007. Oregon passed a domestic partner registration law in 2007, but implementation is currently on hold pending a possible ballot initiative. Vermont created civil unions in 2000 and Connecticut followed in 2005. New Jersey established civil unions in 2007 and New Hampshire is scheduled to implement them in 2008. Massachusetts permitted marriage for same-sex couples beginning in 2004.

Table 5. Percentage increases in same-sex couples from 2000 to 2006, by public policy initiatives affecting same-sex couples.

	% Increase in Same-sex couples, 2000 to 2006	% Increase in population, 2000 to 2006	Rate of same-sex couple increase relative to population increase
United States	31%	6.4%	4.9
Legal recognition of same-sex couples			
Legal recognition established by 2006	23%	5.8%	3.9
No recognition	32%	6.5%	5.0
Constitutional amendment effectively banning marriage for same-sex couples			
No constitutional amendment	27%	6.1%	4.5
Constitutional amendment	37%	6.8%	5.5
Constitutional amendment established in part via a public vote	41%	5.6%	7.3

The percentage increase in same-sex couples from 2000 to 2006 was nine percentage points higher in states without legal recognition of those couples (32% versus 23%). The pace of the increase exceeded the pace of population growth by a factor of five in those states, higher than the comparable figure of 3.9 in states with legal recognition of same-sex couples.

The results are even more distinct when considering the differences in states by whether or not they passed a constitutional amendment banning marriage for same-sex couples. In states that did pass a constitutional amendment, the number of same-sex couples increased by 37%, ten percentage points higher than the increase in states without such a constitutional amendment. The rate of increase outpaced the population in states with an amendment by a factor of 5.5 compared to 4.5 in states without an amendment.

Recall that 24 states included a statewide election as part of the process of enacting their constitutional amendment banning marriage for same-sex couples. These states engaged in perhaps the most public debates about the issue. In states with an election, the increases in the number of same-sex couples were even higher, at 41%, and the pace was 7.3 times that of the overall population increase. The high level of public discourse in these states during this period may have led a larger portion of lesbian and gay couples to become more public about their lives, perhaps in hopes of having an impact on the debate.

Same-sex couple regional migration patterns are similar to those of the general population

While increases of same-sex couples in a region could indicate regional differences in coming out among the lesbian and gay population, they could also be a result of broader population shifts in the country. In the period from 1990 to 2006, the U.S. population generally shifted South and West. Movements that bring more people to a region no doubt bring more lesbian and gay people to a region. The Mountain, South Atlantic, West South Central and Pacific regions all experienced population increases that exceed the national average. While internal migration is not the only source of these increases — migration to the U.S. from outside of the country and differences in regional birthrates also contribute — it does constitute a major factor in regional population change.

Same-sex couple migration patterns do not differ substantially from the patterns observed in the general population. Census 2000 data provide information about where individuals lived five years prior to the

Census. Table 4 shows the nearly identical migration patterns of all adults, and of those who are part of a same-sex couple who moved from one region to another, between 1995 and 2000. For example, among all adults who moved, nearly a quarter (24%) moved to the South Atlantic region. Among those in a same-sex couple who moved during the same period, 23% moved to the South Atlantic. Migration patterns from 1995 to 2000 are nearly identical for all adults as compared to those in same-sex couples. The inter-regional mobility patterns of same-sex couples from 1995 to 2000 were correlated with the patterns observed for all adults at 0.96 (a value of 1.00 would indicate a perfect correlation). The only difference (and a relatively modest one at that) was that about one in six adults moved to the Pacific region, compared to about one in five of those who are part of a same-sex couple.

Table 4. Destination region among those who moved across regions from 1995 to 2000, all adults and those in a same-sex couple

	% Moved to the region from 1995 to 2000	
	Adults	Same-sex couples
New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont	5%	5%
Middle Atlantic: New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania	11%	11%
Upper Midwest: Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin	11%	10%
Central Midwest: Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota, Missouri	6%	5%
South Atlantic: Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia	24%	23%
East South Central: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee	6%	6%
West South Central: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas	11%	10%
Mountain: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming	11%	12%
Pacific: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington	16%	19%

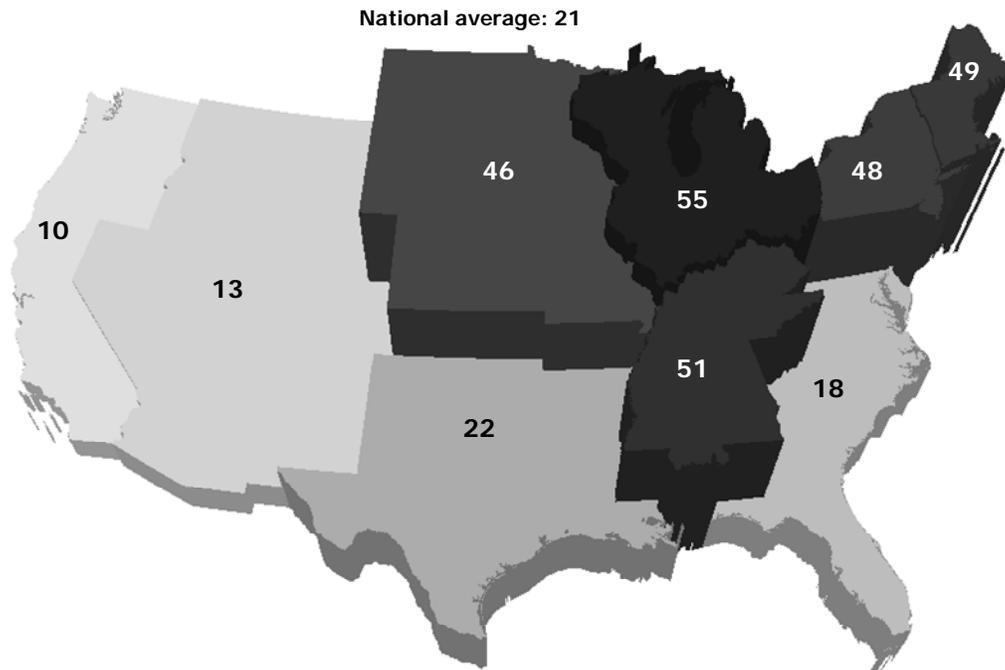
Midwest, New England and Mid-Atlantic regional same-sex couple increases far outpaced population growth

If same-sex couples broadly follow the migration patterns of the population, then constructing a ratio of the percentage increase in same-sex couples in a region and the percentage increase in the population offers a means to quantify the degree to which coming out (and perhaps associated increased levels of coupling) among lesbians and gay men drives observed increases in same-sex couples.

A high number in this ratio means that same-sex couple increases far outpace population increases, suggesting that coming out played a more prominent role in explaining regional same-sex couple increases. A low number means that same-sex couple increases more closely mirror population increases, suggesting that migration of same-sex couples along with the general population played a more prominent role in explaining increases in same-sex couples in that region.

Figure 4 shows the rate at which same-sex couple increases exceed increases in the general population. Note that in the United States the number of same-sex couples increased 21 times faster than did the population from 1990 to 2006.

Figure 4. Increase in same-sex couples relative to population increase, 1990 to 2006.



The number of same-sex couples in the Midwest, New England and Mid-Atlantic regions grew from 46 to 55 times faster than the population from 1990 to 2006. In areas that experienced more substantial population increases — West South Central, South Atlantic, Mountain and Pacific regions — the percentage increases in same-sex couples still far exceeded those of the population by factors of 10 to 22 times higher.

Combining findings from Table 4 and Figure 4, an interesting pattern emerges. The Midwest and East South Central regions of the country are socially conservative areas where large increases in same-sex couples appear to be primarily driven by large-scale coming out among the native population. Perhaps due to a longer history of acceptance of its lesbian and gay population, increases in same-sex couples have tended to be relatively modest in the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions when compared to the Midwest and South. But it still appears that coming out among natives has played a prominent role in explaining the increases there.

While socially conservative regions in West South Central, South Atlantic and Mountain states have experienced large increases in the number of same-sex couples, it is likely that the influx of those couples into the region as part of broader migration trends account for more of the increase than in other parts of the country.

Migration also appears to be an important factor in explaining the relatively modest increases in same-sex couples in the more socially liberal West.

CONCLUSION

Census Bureau figures showing continuing increases in the number of same-sex couples track with other surveys showing that more Americans than ever before are identifying as lesbian, gay and bisexual. More detailed analyses of Census and ACS data show distinctive geographic patterns to these increases in same-sex couples. They are disproportionately large in the most socially conservative regions of the country.

It is important to note that migration trends in the United States since 1990 have generally been marked by population shifts to the more conservative southern and mountain states. No doubt part of the explanation for the increase in same-sex couples in these regions is that the larger lesbian, gay and bisexual community has followed this trend. However, increases in the number of same-sex couples have outpaced broader population increases in all areas of the country. This is most apparent in the Midwest, where the rate of increase for same-sex couples far exceeds the somewhat more modest population gains. It is clear that coming out represents an important factor in explaining the increases in same-sex couples in all regions of the country.

Same-sex couples are becoming far more visible beyond traditional gay areas. New Mexico, Colorado and Utah are now among states with the highest concentrations of same-sex couples in their populations. Clearly these couples (and likely the broader lesbian, gay and bisexual population) are coming out and identifying themselves in government surveys at higher rates in parts of the country where they have been historically least accepted, suggesting that these areas have become more hospitable and welcoming of this often stigmatized population.

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APPENDIX

How accurate are Census and ACS counts of same-sex couples?

The Census and American Community Survey represent the only large national data sources from which to ascertain ongoing counts and characteristics of same-sex couples in the United States and within states and cities. While the U.S. Census Bureau maintains rigorous standards to ensure that its data collection efforts yield accurate information, there are still some factors that could contribute to inaccuracies in the counts of same-sex couples.

One such inaccuracy that could lead to an undercount of same-sex couples is simply a function of the willingness of same-sex couples to report themselves as “unmarried partners.” While stigma associated with homosexuality is declining in the United States, it has hardly disappeared. Some couples may still be reluctant to identify themselves as spouses or partners due to concerns about confidentiality. It may also be true that some couples are not comfortable the terms “husband/wife” or “unmarried partner” to describe their relationship.⁷

Another concern with accuracy stems from the likelihood that some different-sex married couples accidentally miscode the sex of one of the spouses, thus mistakenly creating a same-sex married couple. Since 2000, the Census Bureau has coded all same-sex spouses as unmarried partners. As the ratio of different-sex married couples to same-sex couples is approximately 90-to-1, even very small sex miscoding among different-sex married couples could result in a high level of “contamination” among the same-sex couples. For example, if two in a thousand different-sex married couples miscode the sex of one of the spouses, then 20% of the same-sex unmarried partner couples would actually be different-sex married couples. This form of error would suggest the Census and ACS might be over-estimating the number of same-sex couples.

But sex miscoding could occur across all couple types. A recent analysis by Census Bureau staff tried to measure this miscoding by considering the first names of partners and spouses among couples and reallocating them when the recorded sex of the respondent differed from the usual sex of individuals with that name (X and O’Connell, 2007). They found that Census estimates actually still likely *undercount* the number of same-sex couples. They state that the actual number could be as much as twice the Census estimate.

This study also points out that counts of same-sex couples from the ACS are likely more accurate than Census enumerations since nearly half of respondents in the ACS submit their answers using computer-assisted technology. The computer programs used actually verify the sex of a spouse if the respondent indicates the presence of a same-sex “husband” or “wife”, greatly reducing the possibility of sex miscoding among different-sex married couples.

It is also important to remember that Census figures come from an actual count of all U.S. households, while counts from the American Community Survey are estimates drawn from a nearly two million household sample of U.S. households. As a result, ACS estimates include a margin of error from which upper and lower bounds of the estimates can be derived.

One final note regarding accuracy involves comparisons between 1990 counts of same-sex couples and later counts: As noted before, the 1990 counts do not include same-sex spouses, which could certainly explain some of the increases since that year.

⁷ Badgett and Rogers (2003) find that these were the two most popular reasons that couples chose not to identify themselves in Census 2000.

Appendix Table 1. Estimates of the number of same-sex unmarried partner couples, Census 1990, Census 2000, and American Community Survey 2002-2006.

State	1990	2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Alabama	1069	8,109	6,173	6,317	7,734	8,602	9,594
Alaska	265	1,180	1,109	875	1,803	1,644	1,003
Arizona	2337	12,332	11,773	20,028	15,031	16,931	15,164
Arkansas	506	4,423	3,846	4,758	6,629	5,890	4,752
California	36602	92,138	78,822	93,928	91,411	107,772	108,734
Colorado	2070	10,045	12,864	14,497	13,624	15,915	13,413
Connecticut	2088	7,386	7,613	9,818	8,512	10,174	9,540
Delaware	212	1,868	1,811	2,019	2,435	2,087	2,515
District of Columbia	2213	3,678	2,823	3,106	3,038	3,420	3,620
Florida	8492	41,048	37,978	42,171	49,966	54,929	51,986
Georgia	3502	19,288	14,146	25,839	18,604	24,424	25,185
Hawaii	602	2,389	2,359	2,910	2,378	3,262	3,054
Idaho	178	1,873	2,612	2,603	2,407	2,096	2,868
Illinois	6220	22,887	24,827	25,905	30,088	30,013	30,432
Indiana	1935	10,219	14,399	13,500	16,075	15,714	15,757
Iowa	613	3,698	6,819	5,740	6,020	5,833	7,427
Kansas	647	3,973	4,390	5,443	4,375	6,663	6,404
Kentucky	862	7,114	8,121	8,653	7,348	9,710	10,303
Louisiana	1331	8,808	7,290	11,039	8,338	9,006	9,882
Maine	814	3,394	4,291	3,786	4,352	4,847	4,733
Maryland	3028	11,243	12,449	16,068	14,709	15,607	15,176
Massachusetts	5194	17,099	19,852	16,766	18,469	23,744	23,655
Michigan	3389	15,368	14,159	20,657	25,316	22,701	23,445
Minnesota	3052	9,147	12,586	13,218	11,899	16,081	14,314
Mississippi	673	4,774	3,035	4,226	6,895	4,330	2,972
Missouri	1931	9,428	12,800	14,468	13,148	14,722	14,955
Montana	286	1,218	1,413	2,618	1,960	1,662	2,149
Nebraska	455	2,332	2,349	3,851	3,348	3,986	2,821
Nevada	613	4,973	4,764	5,409	6,186	6,017	6,691
New Hampshire	658	2,703	3,320	3,386	3,277	5,578	4,179
New Jersey	3562	16,604	13,490	16,533	21,452	20,677	21,405
New Mexico	850	4,496	3,298	5,499	7,514	6,063	5,969
New York	13748	46,490	36,659	49,333	44,218	50,854	51,211
North Carolina	1976	16,198	14,150	20,420	20,320	19,648	22,165
North Dakota	103	703	1,191	803	1,175	1,070	918
Ohio	3777	18,937	20,899	21,502	21,391	30,669	28,495
Oklahoma	908	5,763	5,247	5,686	8,071	8,159	7,800
Oregon	2263	8,932	10,383	11,701	13,471	10,899	13,608
Pennsylvania	4763	21,166	26,572	30,740	32,835	29,213	29,642
Rhode Island	497	2,471	2,471	2,663	4,017	2,376	2,928
South Carolina	1067	7,609	6,015	10,508	7,850	10,563	10,481
South Dakota	47	826	924	1,329	958	998	1,153

Tennessee	1340	10,189	11,326	11,008	14,573	13,570	15,105
Texas	7871	42,912	38,660	45,261	39,910	49,423	53,208
Utah	401	3,370	2,820	5,340	6,520	4,307	6,503
Vermont	370	1,933	1,905	2,823	2,261	2,157	2,886
Virginia	3067	13,802	15,182	18,460	16,390	19,673	19,095
Washington	4344	15,900	17,484	20,261	21,503	23,903	20,233
West Virginia	307	2,916	2,403	2,989	1,950	3,423	3,882
Wisconsin	2002	8,232	9,290	14,501	14,483	14,894	15,220
Wyoming	30	807	862	771	959	1,044	1,237
United States	145130	594,391	582,024	701,733	707,196	776,943	779,867

Appendix Table 2. Estimates of the number of same-sex unmarried partner couples in the fifty largest U.S. cities (2006), Census 1990, Census 2000, and American Community Survey 2002-2006.

City	1990	2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Albuquerque, New Mexico	380	1,448	2,071	2,187	2,651	2,193	1,344
Arlington, Texas	104	670	714	1,771	602	305	729
Atlanta, Georgia	1,080	2,833	2,439	2,755	1,355	3,812	1,620
Austin, Texas	956	2,532	2,360	3,405	4,003	2,362	2,832
Baltimore, Maryland	1,010	2,118	2,175	1,693	2,364	2,842	1,697
Boston, Massachusetts	1,770	3,140	1,430	2,393	1,367	4,876	4,067
Charlotte, North Carolina	251	1,443	575	3,360	1,045	1,660	2,385
Chicago, Illinois	3,842	9,412	8,421	4,732	9,939	10,001	8,983
Cleveland, Ohio	261	1,135	895	223	336	1,067	759
Colorado Springs, Colorado	124	623	447	1,142	505	1,053	711
Columbus, Ohio	802	2,588	1,971	2,957	2,873	3,444	2,709
Dallas, Texas	1,398	4,988	3,777	3,520	1,540	5,283	4,462
Denver, Colorado	1,008	2,916	2,127	1,790	1,549	3,387	3,586
Detroit, Michigan	602	1,745	950	3,112	1,550	791	724
El Paso, Texas	200	796	1,039	1,150	910	1,097	1,300
Fort Worth, Texas	196	1,245	1,386	1,742	1,485	1,931	2,254
Fresno, California	216	982	451	1,753	396	1,307	1,160
Honolulu, Hawaii	294	783	599	1,149	767	831	1,446
Houston, Texas	1,822	6,076	5,487	3,917	4,941	5,511	5,986
Indianapolis, Indiana	698	2,275	4,163	2,720	2,169	2,680	3,237
Jacksonville, Florida	346	1,693	1,952	2,359	2,842	2,194	2,198
Kansas City, Missouri	532	1,502	1,204	2,336	714	2,151	1,873
Las Vegas, Nevada	130	1,228	1,374	877	1,235	1,591	1,756
Long Beach, California	1,196	2,266	2,791	2,707	1,802	2,268	2,158
Los Angeles, California	6,131	12,049	11,405	12,887	13,056	12,372	13,189
Louisville, Kentucky	148	789	694	1,687	1,677	1,649	1,981
Memphis, Tennessee	229	1,482	670	1,537	1,457	1,546	2,141
Mesa, Arizona	108	720	429	1,218	612	1,419	790
Miami, Florida	343	1,167	-	2,434	587	1,353	1,041
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	495	1,408	2,112	2,182	1,933	1,804	1,276
Minneapolis, Minnesota	1,432	2,622	1,505	3,108	2,982	3,356	2,450
Nashville, Tennessee	504	1,608	2,131	786	1,950	2,033	1,370
New York, New York	9,301	25,906	13,720	21,120	21,382	23,321	24,404
Oakland, California	1,315	2,650	1,911	2,158	1,464	3,010	2,358
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	341	1,189	1,125	811	1,156	1,420	1,367
Omaha, Nebraska	226	709	739	1,149	744	769	568
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	1,615	4,308	3,647	5,140	6,273	4,033	2,867
Phoenix, Arizona	927	4,184	4,306	6,998	3,536	5,535	3,764
Portland, Oregon	1,049	3,017	3,168	3,329	3,885	3,438	4,368
Sacramento, California	917	1,709	812	1,344	3,702	2,824	1,780
San Antonio, Texas	433	2,278	2,226	2,964	2,627	2,757	3,717
San Diego, California	2,033	4,720	1,377	5,797	6,227	5,437	5,297

San Francisco, California	6,816	8,902	8,169	9,095	9,032	8,490	10,246
San Jose, California	812	2,107	1,318	2,845	1,563	2,829	2,110
Seattle, Washington	2,393	4,965	5,384	5,691	6,289	5,762	4,695
Tucson, Arizona	504	1,422	1,429	1,412	2,126	2,198	1,187
Tulsa, Oklahoma	262	919	1,065	626	1,198	1,572	998
Virginia Beach, Virginia	221	616	205	1,605	1,159	1,220	492
Washington, District of Columbia	2,213	3,678	2,823	3,106	3,038	3,420	3,620
Wichita, Kansas	121	685	206	433	664	996	911
All fifty	60,107	152,246	123,374	157,212	149,259	169,200	158,963