

**Bowling Green State University**  
**The Center for Family and Demographic Research**

<http://www.bgsu.edu/organizations/cfdr>

Phone: (419) 372-7279      [cfdr@bgsu.edu](mailto:cfdr@bgsu.edu)

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**MEASURING MARRIAGE TO SAME-GENDER COUPLES**

**IN THE UNITED STATES:**

**ASSESSING NEW DATA FROM THE CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY**

Wendy D. Manning

Krista K. Payne

Center for Family and Demographic Research  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403  
419-372-2850  
[wmannin@bgsu.edu](mailto:wmannin@bgsu.edu)

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**Measuring Marriage to Same-Gender Couples in the United States:  
Assessing New Data from the Current Population Survey**

**ABSTRACT**

Since June 26, 2015 marriages to same-sex couples have been legally recognized across every state in the nation, but there have been challenges to measuring these marriages. Starting in 2017 every household in the Current Population Survey (CPS) was offered a new household roster that directly identified same-sex and different-sex cohabiting and married couples. To gauge how the estimates of same-gender households compare across the traditional and new roster we compare estimates of same-sex couple households using the traditional roster in the 2015 and 2016 CPS to estimates based on the new roster using the 2017 and 2018 CPS. Employing these new indicators, we establish the levels of cohabitation and marriage among same-sex couples and distinguish differences according to their sociodemographic characteristics. These findings have implications for the measurement of same-sex couples and our understanding of marriage among sexual minorities.

Keywords: Sexual Minority, Same-Gender Couples, Measurement, Marriage, Cohabitation

## **Measuring Marriage to Same-Gender Couples in the United States:**

### **Assessing New Data from the Current Population Survey**

The June 26, 2015 landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, ensured that marriages to same-sex couples were legal across the entire United States. Social science data collection has not kept pace with the shifting legal landscape. The Current Population Survey (CPS) provides the first opportunity to directly measure same-gender marriage and cohabitation.

Establishing counts and characteristics of same-sex couples has been possible since 1990 using the Decennial Census (DC) and 1995 using the CPS, but there have been struggles in obtaining accurate measurement. Identification of same-gender couples was a two-stage process. Respondents identified their own gender “male” or “female” and the gender of all household members. The traditional household roster included relationship status “wife/husband” as first on the roster with “unmarried partner” toward the end near roommate and boarder. Same-gender and different-gender cohabiting and married couples were identified by combining the gender and relationship status questions.

A variety of editing strategies have been deployed to count same-gender couples. In 1990 the DC and in 1995 the CPS assumed the gender responses were errors for same-gender married couples and were recoded as different-gender married couples (Cohn 2011; Gates 2010). Starting in 2000 the DC, 2010 the CPS, and 2008 the American Community Survey (ACS) operated under the assumption that gender was correctly identified, and reclassified same-gender married couples as same-gender cohabiting couples (Cohn 2011; Gates 2010; Lofquist & Ellis 2011). However, significant measurement error was identified (Black et al. 2007; Gates & Steinberger 2009; Kreider & Lofquist 2015; Gates, 2015; O’Connell & Gooding, 2006; O’Connell & Feliz 2011). Relatively few errors in a large population of different-gender married couples had a

substantial impact on the estimates of the relatively small size of the same-gender married population (see Gates 2015). Recognition of these errors lead to the release of ‘adjusted’ ACS estimates and researchers modified counts based on flags for gender edits, allocation of marital status, and marriage year (Gates 2015).

It was first possible to distinguish same-sex married and cohabiting couples using the traditional roster in the ACS in 2013, about one-third (34.6%) of same-sex couple households were married (Gates 2015). However, the CPS continued combining same-gender cohabiting and married couples through data edits.

After considerable testing, the Census Bureau invoked a new strategy to measure same-sex couples. The CPS implemented a new household roster to directly measure same-sex couples (cohabiting and married) that was administered to all households in 2017. The household roster included relationship options, “opposite-sex’ or “same-sex” marriages and unmarried partnerships (see Figure 1). This new roster will be included in the 2020 DC and the 2019 ACS. We expand on this body of work by comparing estimates of same-gender couples using the traditional roster in the 2015-2016 CPS to the new roster in the 2017-2018 CPS. We examine how the characteristics of same-gender couples differ according to roster type. While we acknowledge some variation may be due to change over time, the timeframe is quite narrow.

Second, by employing the new roster we report the first Census-based estimates of cohabitation and marriage among same-gender couples as well as their sociodemographic characteristics. We anticipate same-gender married and cohabiting couples will differ in similar ways as different- gender couples. We expect that categorizing all same-sex couples together may mask important differences. These results have implications for our understanding of the levels and correlates of cohabitation and marriage among same-gender couples.

## DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis of the identification of same-gender couples relies on data spanning 2015 to 2018 from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the integrated public use microdata series-Current Population Survey (IPUMS-CPS) (Flood, King, Rodgers, Ruggles, & Warren 2018), the U.S. Census Bureau Research File, and the U.S. Census Bureau Bridge File. The CPS is a nationally representative survey jointly sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. All data are weighted--replicate weights are applied to generate empirically derived standard errors. The CPS questionnaires are all administered by telephone or in-person interviews so avoid issues with interview mode that have been identified in other data sets such as the ACS (Lofquist & Ellis 2011).

In May of 2015 the CPS introduced a new relationship to the householder question to incoming sample members. This change resulted in a new household roster in which spouses and unmarried partners were able to specifically identify as “opposite-sex or same-sex” (see Figure 2). Also the partner relationship status was moved up from the end of the roster to the top of the roster. As described above the traditional approach to identifying same-gender couples was based on two questions asking gender and relationship to householder (spouse or partner). By the 2017 ASEC-CPS, all rotation groups had received the new roster question.

We pool the 2015-2016 data (prior to the new roster) and the 2017-2018 data (following the full implementation of the new roster). See Appendix Figure 1 for more details. To provide the cleanest parallel samples possible while maximizing sample-size and without double-counting households, we pooled two sets of consecutive March CPS files for these analyses (Figure 2). The first set represent relationship data collected via the old roster response categories from respondents in months 5-8 of their data collection cycles in 2015 and 2016 (N =

394 same-sex couples). The second set represent data collected via the new roster response categories from respondents in months 1-4 of their collection cycles 2017 and 2018 (N = 537 same-sex couples). The latter represents the first time we are able to distinguish couples who were married and cohabiting using the new roster.

All independent variables were constructed at the couple-level. Given the small share of the U.S. population living in same-gendered coresidential relationships, the coding strategy employed aimed at optimizing couple-level detail without compromising statistical power.

*Household composition* was recoded into three-categories distinguishing among couples who lived in (1) couple only households, (2) households with the couple & at least one biological/step/adopted child (and possibly others), (3) households with the couple & others who were not biological/step/adopted children.

We included gender, age, race/ethnicity, nativity status, and residence of the couple. *Couple gender* is coded as a binary variable, 1 man and 0 woman. While a limited conceptualization of gender, it is the only one available in these data. We determined the age of the younger partner and coded this categorically representing the following age ranges: 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50+. We computed the *age gap* within the couple by subtracting the younger member's age from the older member's. *Race/ethnicity* of the couple was coded into a four-category variable: (1) both non-Hispanic Black, (2) both non-Hispanic White, (3) both Hispanic, and (4) Inter-racial/ethnic and/or non-Hispanic other (Asian, American Indian or two or more racial/ethnic groups). *Nativity* of the couple was coded as 1 if at least one member of the couple was foreign born and all others were coded 0. *Residential history* identifies couples in which at least one member had moved in the previous year. Couples currently living in a *metropolitan*

*area* are identified with a binary variable (metro = 1). *Region of current residence* was coded into a four-categories based on Census Regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West.

Three indicators of socioeconomic status were included. *Educational attainment* of the couple was measured using a three category variable identifying (1) couples in which both members had a H S. diploma or less, (2) couples in which only one member had at least a Bachelor's degree, and (3) couples in which both members had at least a Bachelor's degree. Couples' *employment status* was also coded as a three category variable identifying couples in which (1) both members worked full-time, (2) one member worked full-time, or (3) neither member worked full-time. The mean/median *household income* per adult in household was coded in 2018 dollars.

## RESULTS

The distribution of same-sex couples is presented in Table 2. Same-sex couples differ in several significant ways depending on the roster. Based on the new roster one-quarter of same-sex couples had a member ages 18-29 and the old roster indicates that 18% of same-sex couples included a member age 18-29. Similarly, nearly one-quarter of same-sex couples had one partner over age 50 based on the new roster and the traditional roster estimated that nearly two-fifths (38%) of couples had a partner over age 50. The race/ethnicity of partners differed based on roster type, the new roster estimated that three-fifths (59.5%) of same-sex couples were both White in contrast to two-thirds (68%) using the traditional roster. The new roster estimates greater shares of Hispanic couples than the traditional roster. Estimates of moving in the last year are greater in the new roster (85%) versus 79% in the old roster. Greater shares of couples with modest educations (high school degree or less) are identified in the new than the traditional

roster. The employment levels are higher in the new roster (54% both employed) in contrast to the traditional roster (42% both employed).

Table 3 presents the first analysis distinguishing same-gender cohabiting and married couples with new roster data. About 40% of same-sex couples are married and 60% are cohabiting. The distribution according to gender is split evenly. Married same-sex couples more often have children present in their home, 26%, in contrast to 14% among cohabiting couples. The age distribution is disparate with one-third of cohabitators including a partner under age 30 in contrast to only 13% of married same-sex couples. In one-fifth of same-sex cohabiting couples one of the partners is over age 50 while 44% of same-sex married couples had a member over age 50. About half of same gender cohabiting couples include racial/ethnic minorities in contrast to one-third of same-gender married couples. One-fifth of same-sex cohabiting couples had moved in the last year compared to 8% of same-gender married couples. The household income differs with higher levels among same-sex married couples than same-sex cohabiting couples.

## DISCUSSION

The new household roster in the CPS offers a new opportunity to track marriages to same-sex couples and establish the share married among couples who are coresiding (cohabiting or married). The findings here show the importance of adopting new strategies to measure family relationships. The Census has implemented this new household roster across their surveys, including the DC, CPS, ACS, SIPP, and American Housing Survey. We find the new roster results in the identification of a younger, more racially and ethnically diverse and more modestly educated group of same-sex couples than when employing the traditional roster method. It is important to have accurate understandings of same-sex couples. These characteristics are consistent with the argument that the traditional roster measures of same-sex couples likely



included misidentified different-sex married couples. We hope additional data providers modify their rosters, and by default the measurement of same-gender couples, to align with the Census strategy.

We find about two out of five same-gender couples report being married. These estimates are the first available using the new roster and arguably provide the most accurate counts. While a substantial share of same-gender couples are married, the characteristics of cohabiting and married couples differ in critical ways. Cohabiting same-gender couples differ in that they less often have children present, are younger, more mobile, and earn less than their married counterparts. Our findings that distinguish cohabiting and married same-gender couples demonstrate the importance of accounting for marital status in work on the health and well-being of sexual minorities.

New opportunities to assess same-gender couples using Census data are emerging. Our findings are encouraging by demonstrating the utility of the new roster in identifying family structure for same-sex couples. The new roster set the stage for innovative research about the implications of same-gender marriage for adult and child well-being.

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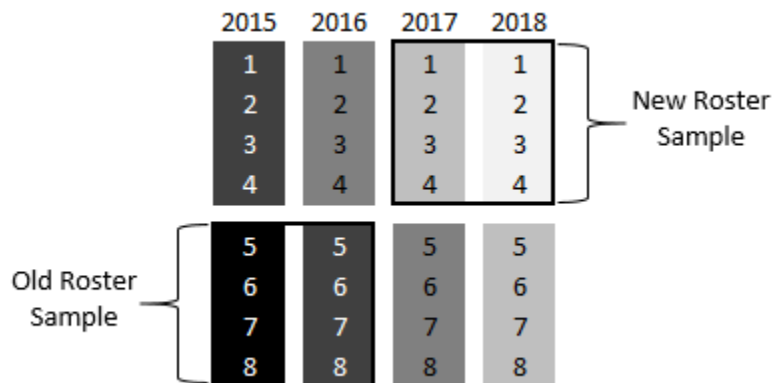
Figure 1. Question and response categories used to derive the new CPS household roster

***How (are / is) (name/you) related to (reference person's name/you)?***

- Opposite-sex Spouse (Husband/Wife)
- Opposite-sex Unmarried Partner
- Same-sex Spouse (Husband/Wife)
- Same-sex Unmarried Partner
- Child
- Grandchild
- Parent (Mother/Father)
- Brother/Sister
- Other relative (Aunt, Cousin, Nephew, Mother-in-law, etc.)
- Foster Child
- Housemate/Roommate
- Roomer/Boarder
- Other nonrelative

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/questionnaires/Demographics.pdf?#>)

Figure 2. Analytic samples by March CPS years and “month in sample”



*Note:* White numbers indicate “months in sample” for households receiving the traditional roster, whereas black numbers indicate “months in sample” for households receiving the new roster. Like-shaded “months in sample,” represent months 1-4 and 5-8 of the data collection cycles for each group of respondents.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on same gender couples

	2015/16 (n = 394)	2017/18 (n = 537)	
Gender			
Men	44.01%	49.13%	
Women	55.99%	50.87%	
Household Composition			
Couple only	72.11%	70.97%	
Couple & at least one bio/step/adopted child (& possibly others)	20.85%	19.53%	
Couple & others, no bio/step/adopted children	7.04%	9.50%	
Age of younger partner			
18-29	18.36%	24.63%	†
30-39	22.27%	26.52%	
40-49	21.53%	22.57%	
50+	37.84%	26.29%	**
Mean Age Gap	6.30	5.99	
Race-Ethnicity			
Both Black <sup>1</sup>	4.29%	3.99%	
Both White	68.25%	59.53%	*
Both Hispanics	4.34%	7.46%	†
Inter-racial/Other/2+	23.12%	29.26%	
Either Foreign Born	16.39%	14.53%	
Residential History			
Neither moved	79.95%	85.32%	†
Metropolitan Area	91.33%	91.17%	
Region			
Northeast	21.92%	18.45%	
Midwest	13.95%	16.86%	
South	34.86%	33.72%	
West	29.28%	30.97%	
Education			
Both HS or < HS	35.04%	42.38%	*
One College	29.40%	23.02%	†
Both College	35.56%	34.60%	
Employed			
Both Work Full Time	41.86%	54.46%	**
One Work Full Time	37.04%	31.03%	
Neither Work Full Time	21.09%	14.51%	*

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Mean Household Income adjusted to March, 2018 dollars	\$118,468	\$116,242
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†  $p < .1$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> Only 16 same gender couples who are both Black in the old roster data

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on same gender couples by relationship status, 2017/2018

	Married (n = 234)	Cohabiting (n = 303)
Gender		
Men	47.90%	50.11%
Women	52.10%	49.89%
Household Composition		
Couple only	68.21%	73.19%
Couple & at least one bio/step/adopted child (& possibly others)	25.71%	14.54% **
Couple & others, no bio/step/adopted children	6.07%	12.27% *
Age of younger partner		
18-29	13.12%	33.92% ***
30-39	26.53%	26.51%
40-49	26.26%	19.59%
50+	34.08%	19.99% **
Mean Age Gap	6.08	5.91
Race-Ethnicity		
Both Black <sup>1</sup>	0.67%	6.67% **
Both White	66.90%	53.58% *
Both Hispanics	5.48%	9.05%
Inter-racial/Other/2+	26.95%	30.71%
Either Foreign Born	15.17%	14.02%
Residential History		
Neither moved	92.53%	79.49% ***
Metropolitan Area	94.08%	88.81%
Region		
Northeast	21.47%	16.01%
Midwest	15.40%	18.05%
South	30.54%	36.28%
West	32.58%	29.67%
Education		
Both HS or < HS	40.54%	43.86%
One College	22.41%	23.51%
Both College	37.04%	32.63%
Employed		
Both Work Full Time	52.61%	55.96%
One Work Full Time	34.81%	27.97%
Neither Work Full Time	12.58%	16.06%
Median Household Income adjusted to March, 2018 dollars	\$104,254	\$84,774
Mean Household Income adjusted to March, 2018 dollars	\$131,646	\$103,802 **

† $p < .1$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

APPENDIX  
Figure 1.

Calendar Month	Month -In-Sample, 2015	Month -In-Sample, 2016
January	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
February	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
<b>March</b>	<b>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</b>	<b>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</b>
April	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
May	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
June	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
July	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
August	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
September	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
October	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
November	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
December	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

*Note:* Shaded numbers indicate those households receiving the NEW roster. Care should be taken when pooling interview years because the CPS sampling methodology involves interviews of each sample household once a month for four consecutive months in 1 year and then again, for the same months a year later. When we pool CPS years, we limit analysis to the months that were not repeated to ensure a household only appears once in the file.