

A Census That Reflects America's Population

The General Counsel of the Department of Commerce recently reached a legal conclusion that reversed a policy of the previous Administration and clarified the legal issues for the Census Bureau to report the growing number of same sex marriages in the United States. Up until now, the Census Bureau has recoded any individual in a same sex couple, who reports that he or she is husband/wife as 'unmarried partner'. Recoding occurs in all Census products and is embedded in the coding process for the 2010 Census and cannot be changed at this late date. With the legal issues clarified, the Census Bureau is now focusing its efforts on the statistical issues of accurately measuring this population in future surveys and will release the raw relationship data from the 2010 Census that will not recode same-sex marriages as unmarried partners.

Measures on Marriage

The form for 2010 Census is one of the shortest in history. It is just 10 questions, and while it asks about the relationships between respondents in a household, it was not designed to count the number of marriages in the country. The American Community Survey (ACS) (formerly the Long Form Census), however, does ask questions about relationship and current marital status, and is regarded as a much better measure of marriage in America. Other Census surveys collect even more detailed information on relationship, marriage and the family, including both the Current Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Next Steps

The Census Bureau will report the Apportionment counts for the states from the 2010 Census to the President on December 31, 2010. Beginning in January through March of 2011, the Census Bureau will release to the states tabular data for redistricting purposes on a schedule to accommodate those states with the most urgent need to redistrict prior to elections scheduled in 2011 and 2012. Later in 2011, the Census Bureau will release detailed tabulations from the 2010 Census, including counts from the relationship question. A footnote will indicate that there are no same-sex couples included in the husband/wife relationship category. At the same time, the Census Bureau will release counts from the relationship question, by state, that show the unedited data (that is, which do not recode same-sex couples who report themselves as husband/wife.)

In the Fall of 2009, the newest annual report from the ACS will be released. The Census Bureau will share what these data tell us about the number and characteristics of same sex marriages, as collected during calendar 2008, based on the unedited responses to this questionnaire. The Census Bureau has invited demographers from the LGBT community to meet with Census Bureau specialists to consult on how to improve the tabulation and reporting of same sex marriages in both the 2010 Census and the ACS.

In 2012, the Census Bureau starts to release special reports based on data from the 2010 Census; the Director has determined that one of these special reports will focus on the question of how same sex couples report their relationships and what the unedited data reveal about this issue. Further, the Director has asked the Census Bureau scientists to undertake evaluations of the relationship and marriage questions on the 2010 Census and the ACS forms, and to consider conducting a special survey, as early as 2011, on marriage and same-sex households. Finally,

Secretary Locke has asked the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, in accordance with its responsibilities for developing and issuing standards, for the collection and tabulation of Federal statistics, to establish an inter-agency task force to examine issues related to collecting and tabulating data on relationships. The mission of this task force will be to research the complex facets of this issue, provide an understanding of its implications and effects, and prepare recommendations that will guide the Census Bureau and other Federal agencies in the development and testing of questions, to more accurately capture data on marriage and family relationships.