

The Economics of Lesbian and Gay Families

Dan A. Black, Seth G. Sanders, and
Lowell J. Taylor

Gary Becker (1991, p. 17) describes the goal of his monumentally influential *A Treatise on the Family* in straightforward terms: The book “tries to show that an analysis based on rational behavior provides a powerful framework for gaining insights into family organization and structure under different laws, circumstances, and cultures.” In pursuing this goal, Becker does not restrict attention to modal family structures of developed Western society. He studies, for example, marriage markets in societies that have dowries and bride prices, and includes rigorous nuanced discussions of polygyny and polyandry. Nonetheless, he includes only two brief mentions of families with same-sex partners: a short discussion of human capital investment decisions for young people who “deviate” from the “normal” in terms of their “biological orientation” (p. 40) and an idea presented about economic forces that might drive homosexual unions to be less stable than heterosexual marriages (p. 330).

The omission of significant discussion about gay- and lesbian-headed families from *A Treatise on the Family* is not especially surprising. (Throughout this paper, we follow common practice by using the term “gay” in reference to men and “lesbian” for women.) There is a general ebb and flow of ideas in Becker’s book—from theoretical to empirical and back—which would have been difficult for discussions of the gay and lesbian population in 1981, when the book was first published, or in 1991 when the enlarged edition was released. Twenty-five years ago, there were no data allowing for a systematic exploration of the economics of gay and lesbian families. Those data that did exist were typically collected using “convenience

■ Dan A. Black is a Professor at the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago and Senior Fellow, National Opinion Research Center (NORC), Chicago, Illinois. Seth G. Sanders is Professor of Economics, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. Lowell J. Taylor is Professor of Economics and Public Policy, H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their e-mail addresses are <black-dan@norc.org>, <sanders@econ.umd.edu>, and <lt20@andrew.cmu.edu>.

sampling” and often failed to include comparable heterosexual men and women, so that social scientists were properly reluctant to draw general conclusions. In addition, as Becker (1991, p. 17) explained, “This book does not does not discuss all aspects of families—even many volumes would be insufficient for that.”

Matters are slowly changing. Although data limitations remain a major obstacle to research of the gay and lesbian population, a number of useful data sources have been developed, giving rise to a nascent literature. In this essay, we make no attempt to review the existing literature: Badgett (2001) provides a discussion of many relevant issues. However, we will identify some of the available data sources, provide some statistics about the gay and lesbian population in the United States, and ask if analysis based on economic reasoning can provide insight into the family outcomes we observe.

Our work reinforces a central theme of Becker’s: that family life and economic life are interwoven. Decisions within families—including couples’ decisions to commit to one another, divorce, bear children, or adopt children—are intrinsically connected to other economic decisions, including human capital accumulation, labor supply, occupational choice, consumption, and decisions about where to live. Gay men and lesbian women face constraints that differ from heterosexual individuals—constraints that affect decisions at the family level and therefore spill over into other aspects of economic life.

Recent Data Sources for Studying the Gay and Lesbian Population

Two breakthrough sources of information on gays and lesbians appeared in the early 1990s, both coming from data collection efforts conducted by the National Opinion Research Center.

First came the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), which served as the data source for two well-known books, *Sex in America* (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata, 1994) and *The Social Organization of Sex: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 1994). The NHSLs collected extensive information on sexual practices and partners, as well as other socioeconomic factors. The main concern with this data is that while the overall NHSLs sample is reasonably large, 3,432, a relatively low share of these people are gay/lesbian/bi-sexual. Although the self-reported incidence of homosexual desire in the NHSLs is 7.7 percent for men and 7.5 percent for women, the rate at which men identify as gay is 2.8 percent and the rate at which women identify as lesbian is 1.4 percent. (These later rates do not differ dramatically from rates at which men and women reported having exclusively same-sex sex, which are 3.0 and 1.6 percent, respectively.) However, with careful handling the NHSLs allows for a discussion of definitions—like issues concerning self-identification of sexual preferences vs. reported behavior—and provides a scientifically defensible basis for estimating prevalence (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 1994, Chapter 8). In this respect, the work was a major improvement over previous efforts, such as the pioneering work of Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1948), in which data were not collected using a random population sample.

A second source of new data is the ongoing General Social Survey (GSS), which began collecting information on respondents' sex partners for the 1989–1991 wave of the survey. The GSS has less detail on sexual practices over a lifetime than the NHSLS, but gay/lesbian/bi-sexual individuals can be identified, and successive waves of the GSS can be pooled to form samples large enough to conduct sensible statistical analysis. For example, pooling the GSS samples from 1988 through 1996 gives between 150 and 450 gay/lesbian/bi-sexual individuals (or thereabouts), depending on the definitions used, along with several thousand other individuals (Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor, 2000).

A new systematic source of information on gays and lesbians is the decennial Census. In collecting these household-based data, the Census Bureau designates as the head of household (or householder) “the member (or one of the members) in whose name the home is owned, being bought, or rented.” Then data are collected on all household members, with each person being identified in terms of his or her relationship to the householder. Prior to 1990, an individual living in a marriage-like relationship with the householder was identified as an “unrelated adult” in the Census. In 1990 the survey instrument was changed to allow such an individual to be identified as an “unmarried partner.” In both 1990 and 2000, the Census instrument allowed households to report an unmarried partnership regardless of the sex of the partners. Census data are useful because the samples of same-sex couples are large—thousands of couples in both 1990 and 2000—and because they allow for comparison with very large samples of heterosexual couples.

The Census data are obviously not a random sample of gays and lesbians, because they are based on people living together, and thus do not include nonpartnered individuals. However, along a number of key dimensions, like general patterns of income and education, statistics among gays, lesbians, and heterosexuals are similar in the Census data and GSS data. Another concern is that any heterosexual couple for whom one individual has a sex miscode will appear as a same-sex couple. A careful examination suggests this problem is reasonably small in the 1990 sample, and while the measurement error problem appears more serious in the 2000 data, proper use of the data can limit the damage (Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor, 2006).¹

Some additional data sources, like data collected for health surveys and other specialized purposes, can also be used for information about the gay and lesbian population. Along with the GSS data, these data can sometimes be used as a “reality check” for inferences drawn from Census data.

The focus of our paper is gay and lesbian families, defined here as households in which the householder reports having a same-sex partner, and our primary data source is the 2000 Census. Table 1, based on data drawn from the GSS, gives some sense of the gay and lesbian population included in our study. This table uses

¹ Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2000) provide a detailed discussion of the 1990 Census sample, including comparisons with other data sources. There are good reasons to believe that the Census data are informative about gay and lesbian couples. For example, the across-metropolitan distribution of gay couples in the 1990 data line up extremely well—with a correlation of nearly 0.90—with AIDS deaths in 1990 (at which time AIDS deaths were predominately of gay men).

Table 1

Characteristics of Gays and Lesbians by Partnership Status

	<i>Gay men</i>		<i>Lesbian women</i>	
	<i>Not partnered</i>	<i>Partnered</i>	<i>Not partnered</i>	<i>Partnered</i>
Percent white	83.6%	77.1%	79.5%	84.4%
Percent black	9.3%	17.3%	16.1%	10.1%
Percent other race	7.1%	5.5%	4.4%	5.6%
Average years of schooling	14.3	13.9	13.8	13.7
Average age	38.2	38.6	36.4	39.4
Average number of sex partners in the last year	3.3	1.5	1.5	1.2
<i>N</i>	109	103	58	98

Sources: Authors' calculation and the General Social Survey, using data pooled from available surveys, 1989 through 2004.

Notes: For this table, we use recent sexual behavior to identify gay/lesbian status, therefore only sexually active individuals are included. Individuals were identified as gay/lesbian if they reported having exclusively same-sex sex within the last year, and were considered "partnered" if they indicated having a "regular partner" and lived in a household with at least two adults.

recent sexual behavior to identify gay/lesbian status (and therefore includes only sexually active individuals). Of 212 households in which the sampled individual is a gay man, about half (103), are partnered. Similarly, 63 percent of lesbian households are partnered. By way of comparison, 59 percent of heterosexual households are partnered.² These data suggest that family formation in the gay and lesbian community differs only modestly from the population as a whole; lesbian women appear to be partnered in approximately the same proportion as heterosexual individuals, while gay men are partnered in moderately lower proportion. Partnered gays and lesbians have levels of education that are similar to their nonpartnered counterparts, and are similarly aged (or slightly older).

Children and Geographic Location for Gay and Lesbian Families

Children are central to the connection between family life and work life. Raising children requires resources which otherwise would be allocated to other uses, including adult consumption, and also redirects parental time from market work. Many of the choices that couples make are influenced by their decisions about the number of children to rear. In this section we focus on choice of location; in subsequent sections, we also discuss choices over household specialization and human capital accumulation. We begin our discussion with the issue of children in

² The statistic for heterosexual households is based on a sample of 18,707. It is worth noting that the rates at which *individuals* are partnered are higher than the *household* partnership rates. For example, in a population in which one-half of households are single-person and one-half of households are partnered, two-thirds of individuals are in partnerships.

gay and lesbian households because this dimension is the most obvious one on which lesbian couples, gay couples, and heterosexual couples face different constraints—both legal and biological.

The Demand for Children

Becker (1991) provides the authoritative analysis of the demand for children in Chapter 5 of *A Treatise on the Family*. The central idea is that relative prices play an important role in childbearing decisions, though some subtlety is necessary in this application of price theory. Becker writes (p. 138), “Children are usually not purchased but are self-produced by each family, using market goods and services and the own time of parents, especially of mothers. Since the cost of own time and household production functions differs among families, the total cost of producing and rearing children also differs.” These differences in the opportunity cost, which represent a (shadow) “price” of children, affects choice as expected (p. 138): “[A]n increase in the relative price of children . . . reduces the demand for children and increases the demand for other commodities (if real income is held constant).” Becker argues that there are sensible reasons behind households’ general apparent preferences for own children, but of course many families also adopt children as an alternative to “self-production.” The central logic of price theory should pertain here as well; households that face higher opportunity costs should adopt fewer children.

Table 2 indicates that gay and lesbian couples in the United States have far fewer children than comparable heterosexual couples. The vast majority of children live with a biological parent; in the case of children residing in gay and lesbian households, many have a gay or lesbian parent who was previously married (or in a smaller number of cases, a gay or lesbian parent who is still married) to a person of the opposite sex. Costs of children are higher for gay and lesbian couples than for their heterosexual counterparts. Gay and lesbian couples who wish to adopt must face not just monetary costs but also time and effort to overcome implicit and explicit discriminatory obstacles. Nearly all states do allow gay and lesbian persons to adopt (Florida is the lone exception), but only nine states (plus Washington, D.C.) allow joint adoption by openly gay and lesbian couples.³

Table 2 shows that adoption rates by gay couples are somewhat below those of their heterosexual counterparts while adoption rates by lesbian couples are slightly higher. Because of the relatively high impediments for adoption faced by gay and lesbian couples, we expect that gay and lesbian people will be more flexible than their married heterosexual counterparts in terms of the characteristics of the children they adopt. Evidence along these lines is found in row C, which indicates that gay and lesbian couples are more likely to adopt a child whose race differs from their own.

³ In states that do not recognize joint adoption, the partners may be able to pursue a time-consuming and stressful process whereby one partner makes the initial adoption and then the second partner pursues a legal application as co-parent. The point is that matters are much more difficult and complicated for gay and lesbian couples than for heterosexual couples. See “Policies Related to Children” in Chapter 8 of Badgett (2001).

Table 2

Children in Same-Sex and Heterosexual Families

	<i>Gay male partners</i>	<i>Lesbian partners</i>	<i>Heterosexual couples</i>
A. Percentage of households by number of children			
<i>None</i>	90.3%	77.9%	38.0%
<i>One</i>	5.0	12.1	21.5
<i>Two</i>	2.9	6.7	25.4
<i>Three or more</i>	1.8	3.4	15.0
B. Percentage of households with adopted children	0.7%	2.8%	2.2%
C. Percentage of adopted children with a “different race”	13.8%	28.0%	10.6%
D. Income of highest-earning partner in households with adopted children	\$68,491	\$63,996	\$57,975
E. Income of highest-earning partner in comparable households with no adopted children	\$54,828	\$42,758	\$48,147
<i>N</i>	7,549	7,877	2,971,440

Source: Authors’ calculations and the Public Use Micro Sample of the 2000 Decennial Census.

Notes: If a member of a couple has age or sex imputed, that couple was not included in the sample. No couples were included if a member had a reported age younger than 18. Gay and lesbian households are same-sex couples in which neither partner has an imputed marital status. (See Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2006) for an explanation why those households in which the marital status of both members of the couple were imputed are likely to be contaminated with married couples.) Heterosexual couples include married couples (limited to couples in which one of the members of the couple is the head of household) and heterosexual partners. Data are reweighted so that the distribution of ages of the oldest member of the couples matches the aggregate distribution for same-sex couples.

Becker argued that because no substitutes exist for children, children are likely to be a “normal” good: that is, as income increases people should *ceteris paribus* have more children (though as an empirical matter this observation will be complicated by such factors as the opportunity cost of parents’ time, especially the mother’s time). Statistics presented in rows D and E of Table 2 are consistent with Becker’s prediction. The earnings of the highest-earning partner (usually the male in heterosexual relationships) is higher among families who take the deliberative step of adopting children than families who do not.

Location: Why Do Gay Couples Live in Upscale Urban Centers?

The importance and complexity of location is a major theme in the gay studies literature.

The geographic distribution of gays and lesbians is likely to differ from heterosexual individuals for several reasons. Gays and lesbians are relatively small minorities in the population. Opportunities for same-sex social interaction are limited in many communities simply because of small numbers, and can be made even more difficult by the varying levels of social disapproval and discrimination found across U.S. communities. Thus, it is not surprising that gay and lesbian couples are more likely to locate in urban areas, as shown in the first row of Table 3. The remaining rows of Table 3 show that individuals in same-sex partnerships appear to be less likely than those in heterosexual partnerships to live near their places of birth, or to have been born in the same state as their partner.

Table 3
Geographic Location of Same-Sex and Heterosexual Families

	<i>Gay male partners</i>	<i>Lesbian partners</i>	<i>Heterosexual couples</i>
A. Percent living in an urban area	90.2%	85.3%	74.9%
B. Percent with both partners born in the same state	33.6%	39.0%	56.7%
C. Percent living in the state of birth			
<i>Neither partner</i>	45.1%	37.8%	35.8%
<i>One partner</i>	32.2	33.0	25.3
<i>Both partner</i>	22.7	29.2	38.9
<i>N</i>	7,549	7,877	2,971,440

Sources: Authors' calculations and the Public Use Micro Sample of the 2000 Decennial Census.

Notes: If a member of a couple has age or sex imputed, that couple was not included in the sample. No couples were included if a member had a reported age younger than 18. Gay and lesbian households are same-sex couples in which neither partner has an imputed marital status. Married couples are limited to couples in which one of the members of the couple is the head of household. Data are reweighted so that the distribution of ages of the oldest member of the couples matches the aggregate distribution for same-sex couples.

Given that gay and lesbian people do concentrate in particular urban areas, it is reasonable to ask about factors that determine *which* cities attract gays and lesbians. Are gay or lesbian concentrations the result of historical accident, or do economic constraints lead to observed geographical sorting? Do differential costs of having children play a role in the specific geographical settlement of gays and lesbians?

For the present analysis, we restrict attention to gay male couples. Table 4 presents "gay index" statistics for major metropolitan areas in the United States.⁴ This statistic indicates the fraction of the city's population identified as same-sex male partners divided by the corresponding fraction for the country as a whole, so that a value of 1.0 indicates that the concentration of gay couples in the city is the same as in the rest of the country. We notice high concentrations of gay households in several coastal cities with mild climates—San Francisco, Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Seattle—and in other fashionable urban locations like New York, Washington, and Austin. Lower-ranked cities include such declining older industrial cities as Birmingham, Buffalo, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Detroit.

Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2002) argue that the logic of standard urban economic models is helpful in understanding observed urban location choices of gay partners. In these models, like Roback (1982), high amenity locations—like beautiful scenery or pleasant weather—have relatively high housing prices (and possibly lower wages). Remember, gay partners are much less likely than other couples to have children in their households. One consequence of the relatively high price of children faced by gay couples is that these households

⁴ For this exercise we use confidential files of the complete long-form data from the 1990 Census. Even using Census data, the sample of gay couples is small enough that we must confine attention to large metropolitan areas.

Table 4

Concentration of Gay Couples in Metropolitan Areas, 1990

<i>CMSA/MSAs ranked by concentration of gay couples</i>		<i>Gay concentration</i>		<i>Gay concentration</i>	
1	San Francisco	4.95	26	Milwaukee	1.01
2	Washington	2.68	27	Columbus	0.99
3	Austin	2.44	28	Baltimore	0.95
4	San Diego	2.38	29	Rochester	0.89
5	Seattle	2.21	30	Philadelphia	0.86
6	Los Angeles	2.11	31	Albany	0.85
7	Atlanta	1.96	32	Nashville	0.85
8	Sacramento	1.71	33	Cincinnati	0.83
9	Boston	1.67	34	Oklahoma City	0.83
10	Minneapolis–St. Paul	1.61	35	Salt Lake City	0.80
11	Orlando	1.61	36	Norfolk	0.75
12	Denver	1.53	37	St. Louis	0.69
13	New York	1.49	38	Las Vegas	0.69
14	Miami–Fort Lauderdale	1.46	39	Dayton	0.66
15	Portland	1.45	40	Memphis	0.65
16	Houston	1.33	41	San Antonio	0.64
17	Dallas	1.32	42	Detroit	0.60
18	Chicago	1.31	43	Richmond	0.51
19	Indianapolis	1.12	44	Cleveland	0.51
20	New Orleans	1.12	45	Charlotte	0.49
21	Honolulu	1.11	46	Pittsburgh	0.49
22	Phoenix	1.07	47	Louisville	0.47
23	W. Palm Beach–Boca Raton	1.06	48	Greensboro–Winston Salem	0.38
24	Tampa	1.05	49	Buffalo	0.35
25	Kansas City	1.04	50	Birmingham	0.34

Source: Authors' calculations with Gary Gates, using the restricted long form data of the 1990 Decennial Census. Details are provided in Gates (2000).

Notes: For San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami–Fort Lauderdale, New York, and Dallas–Fort Worth, our area definition is the Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA), while for other cities we use the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).

consume more non-child goods, and this increased consumption often takes the form of locating in an expensive high-amenity location. Gays are *not* alone in this specific geographical concentration. We find a rank-order correlation of almost 0.80 between the gay concentration index and a parallel index constructed for childless heterosexual couples. Moreover, San Francisco is an outlier for both demographic groups; among large cities, San Francisco has the highest concentration of gay couples as well as the highest concentration of childless heterosexual couples. Thus, we believe that locational choice is closely tied to childbearing; families that have children direct resources away from adult consumption, and one manifestation of this behavior is in the choice of where the family locates.

An alternative way of evaluating the proposition that gay couples disproportionately locate in high-amenity cities would be to evaluate city-level amenities directly, and then ask if gays indeed locate in the top cities. Kahn (1995) undertakes a city-level amenity ranking exercise using a revealed preferences approach for a

small number of U.S. cities. He provides a 1990 ranking: 1) San Francisco, 2) Los Angeles, 3) New York, 4) Chicago, and 5) Houston. When we use Kahn's city definitions, we find this same ordering pertains for the gay index.

Factors outside the basic urban economic model might also pertain. For example, gay couples might disproportionately locate in cities where residents hold liberal attitudes toward gays. Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2002) demonstrate, though, that while cities with larger gay populations are indeed generally more gay-friendly in terms of measured attitudes, the economic model holds greater predictive power in explaining observed location patterns. That paper also provides some discussion of residential patterns of lesbian households. In part because of the higher presence of children in lesbian households, these families are less likely than their gay male counterparts to locate in urban areas generally and less likely in particular to locate in the most expensive cities

As for neighborhood choices within cities, a tract-level analysis of cities with large concentrations of gay couples, based on 1990 Census data, shows that in comparison to married households with children, gay couples are more likely to live in neighborhoods with (i) above-average housing prices, but (ii) lower quality schools and (iii) poorer indicators of neighborhood safety (Gates, 2000). In short, it appears that gay couples sort into neighborhoods with high levels of non-child amenities.

Household Specialization, Investments in Human Capital, and Income

Among the most important ideas developed in Becker's (1991) *Treatise* are those that center on the connection between household specialization and the accumulation of human capital. Becker argues that the anticipation of rearing children is a primary reason for gender-based household specialization and therefore gender-based patterns of human capital investment. Differences in choices over human capital investment stem in part from a recognition that the return to investment in human capital is a function of its intensity of use.

Gay and lesbian couples offer an interesting comparison to heterosexual couples in this regard; to the extent that specialization is driven by biological comparative advantage, gay and lesbian couples (by virtue of being same-sex) have no split in comparative advantage. Thus if Becker's specialization theory is correct, we expect to observe less household specialization in gay and lesbian couples; that is, gays in couples would not be specialized to the same degree in market work as heterosexual men, while lesbians would be more market-oriented on average than heterosexual women. To the degree that sexual orientation is known prior to human capital choices, the lower degree of specialization should also affect the amount and market-orientation of the types of human capital accumulated for gays and lesbians, which may result in differing levels of income.

Market Specialization

Even though gender roles and expectations have changed in recent decades, many women and men in heterosexual families continue to adopt traditional roles of household specialization, with women specializing in home production. These patterns are manifest in Table 5. Our statistics here (as in most of our tables) are weighted averages, with age-specific weights standardized across columns so as to make the means comparable. The far right columns of Table 5 show work patterns for heterosexual couples. Panel A indicates that among heterosexual couples with some labor market participation, nearly a third have a partner who specializes exclusively in home production. Panel B focuses on the subset of families in which only one partner works. The sample sizes in Panel B show that in the vast majority of heterosexual families, the stay-at-home partner is the woman; that is, the number of households in which the woman works (172,989) is less than one-third the number in which the man works (596,858). In most heterosexual households, though, both the man and woman work; and as Panel C shows, the modal pattern, for these families is that the man works longer hours than the woman and earns more income, as indicated in the columns with $\$M > \F .

To see how specialization patterns play out within gay, lesbian, and heterosexual households, we provide comparable statistics for these couples in the first two sets of columns in Table 5. Gay and lesbian couples are less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have a stay-at-home partner. In general, having a stay-at-home partner for gays and lesbians is more common when children are present in the family. For gays, lesbians, and heterosexuals alike, the stay-at-home partner generally has the lower level of formal education (as measured here by likelihood of holding a college degree). Among households where both partners work, the gap between individuals' income and hours worked is highest among "traditional" heterosexual couples, by which we mean couples for whom the male is the highest earner.

Education

Panel A of Table 6 gives the educational level distribution for partnered men and women in the 2000 U.S. Census. Lesbian and gay partnered individuals are better-educated than their heterosexual counterparts. Similar educational patterns are found in the GSS data, which includes both partnered and unpartnered gays and lesbians (Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor, 2000).⁵

⁵ One concern here is that the results will be biased if poorly educated gays and lesbians were less likely than other gays and lesbians to indicate same-sex partnership status in the Census or report same-sex sexual practices in the GSS. As a test for this concern, for gay men in the GSS we calculated the distribution of individuals' *father's education*. Education is highly correlated across generations. With this in mind, consider the null hypothesis that gay men and other men have the *same* educational distribution (and thus the differences observed in Table 6 are the consequence of education-specific differences in reporting same-sex partnerships). Then we would expect the observed distribution of *father's education* to be skewed toward higher levels of education because of the selection bias (as fathers of poorly educated gay men would be less likely to appear in the sample). In fact, we find no evidence of such a pattern; the distribution of *father's education* is nearly identical for gay men and other men in our GSS data.

Table 5
Specialization within Households

	<i>Gay partners</i>		<i>Lesbian partners</i>		<i>Heterosexual couples</i>			
A. Work status when at least one partner works								
Both partners work	80.6%		80.5%		68.1%			
One partner works	19.4		19.5		31.9			
<i>N</i>	7,160		7,375		2,558,676			
B. Households in which one partner works	<i>Higher earner</i>	<i>Lower earner</i>	<i>Higher earner</i>	<i>Lower earner</i>	<i>Male when \$F > \$M</i>	<i>Female when \$F > \$M</i>	<i>Male when \$M > \$F</i>	<i>Female when \$M > \$F</i>
Income	\$42,320	0	\$31,499	0	0	\$24,203	\$57,720	0
% with college degree	33.4%	26.1%	28.3%	20.4%	14.8%	17.7%	29.8%	20.1%
Hours worked per week	41.4	0	39.7	0	0	37.0	45.3	0
Age	48.1	44.3	48.3	45.2	49.6	50.3	43.0	40.1
% with children < 19	16.1%		32.4%		41.1%		70.0%	
Number of households	1,156		1,202		172,989		596,858	
C. Households in which both partners work								
Income	\$60,707	\$28,968	\$48,436	\$24,905	\$24,574	\$43,376	\$53,531	\$20,301
% with college degree	51.2%	40.5%	51.2%	43.8%	26.8%	38.2%	30.5%	26.8%
Hours worked per week	44.9	41.0	43.6	39.3	42.0	41.6	45.9	35.5
Age	38.8	37.2	38.8	37.9	40.4	38.8	40.2	38.2
% with children < 19	8.5%		23.1%		55.1%		63.9%	
Number of households	6,004		6,173		439,597		1,349,232	

Sources: Authors' calculations and the Public Use Micro Sample of the 2000 Decennial Census.
Notes: If a member of a couple has age or sex imputed, that couple was not included in the sample. No couples were included if a member had a reported age younger than 18. Gay and lesbian households are same-sex couples in which neither partner has an imputed marital status. Heterosexual couples include married couples (limited to couples in which one of the members of the couple is the head of household) and heterosexual partners. Data are reweighted so that the distribution of ages of the oldest member of the couples matches the aggregate distribution for same-sex couples.

We can provide some further details about educational choice among college graduates by looking at data collected for the 1993 National Survey of College Graduates. These data provide extremely detailed information about exact degree and major for a large number of college graduates in the United States. Because the data collection effort used a sampling frame from the 1990 Census, we were able to match the two samples and learn about detailed educational decisions of a (relatively small) sample of college-educated men and women in same-sex relationships, and compare these outcomes with other men and women. In general, men dispropo-

Table 6
Education

			<i>Heterosexual couples</i>	
	<i>Gay partners</i>	<i>Lesbian partners</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>A. Percentage at highest level of education, 2000</i>				
Less than high school	6.8	7.7	12.2	10.8
High school	18.8	19.1	31.0	31.6
Some college	31.2	30.6	28.9	32.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	43.2	42.7	27.9	25.6
<i>N</i>	15,098	15,754	2,971,440	2,971,440
<i>B. Further statistics for college graduates, 1993</i>				
Mean percent female in undergraduate major	44.0	54.4	33.8*	61.5*
Percent earning a post-bachelor's degree	35.0	44.0	39.8*	36.7*
<i>N</i>	223	189	56,302	36,061

* Non-Hispanic whites only.

Sources: For Panel A, authors' calculations and the Public Use Micro Sample of the 2000 Decennial Census. For Panel B, calculations by Amelia Haviland with the authors and the 1993 National Survey of College Graduates matched to the 1990 Decennial Census.

Notes: If a member of a couple has age or sex imputed, that couple was not included in the sample. No couples were included if a member had a reported age younger than 18. Gay and lesbian households are same-sex couples in which neither partner has an imputed marital status. Heterosexual couples include married couples (limited to couples in which one of the members of the couple is the head of household) and heterosexual partners. Data are reweighted so that the distribution of ages matches the aggregate distribution for same-sex couples. Figures with an asterisk are for non-Hispanic whites only. For comparable figures on other minority groups, and for further details on the calculations, see Haviland (2003).

portionately concentrate in such high-paying majors as engineering, economics and business, and computer science, while women are more likely to take lower-paying majors such as education and the fine arts (Black, Haviland, Sanders, and Taylor, 2005). Lesbian women, though, are somewhat less likely to take a “typically female” major than other women. To demonstrate this point we use an index devised by Brown and Corcoran (1997), the *mean percent female in major*, calculated by first obtaining the percent female within each major and then taking the mean of these percentages over the individuals within each demographic group. As shown in Panel B of Table 6, this index is 61 for non-Hispanic white women generally and 54 for lesbian women. Gay men, in contrast, are somewhat more likely to take a “typically female” major than other men; corresponding percentages are 44 for gay men and 34 for non-Hispanic white men generally.

Occupation, Labor Supply, and Earnings

Table 7 presents statistics from the 2000 Census data on wages, income, and labor force participation for partnered men and women aged 25 to 60. Within two major education categories, high school education and college education, men in gay partnerships have moderately lower wages and income than men in heterosexual relationships (married or unmarried partners), while women in lesbian

Table 7

Labor Market Outcomes for Partnered Men and Women Aged 25 to 60

	Gay male partners	Lesbian partners	Heterosexual couples	
			Male	Female
A. Hourly wage				
High school educated	\$14.21	\$13.43	\$16.30	\$11.83
College educated	26.87	22.81	32.26	22.00
All	20.86	18.58	21.80	15.55
B. Earned income				
High school educated	\$22,106	\$18,546	\$31,000	\$13,121
College educated	56,898	45,169	71,601	31,258
All	39,528	31,804	43,600	18,851
C. Labor supplied				
Percentage who work	83.5	82.7	85.5	67.5
Weeks worked per year	41.3	40.6	43.7	32.8
Hours worked per week	37.3	35.9	40.6	27.3
D. Mean percent female in occupation	47.0%	54.8%	38.7%	60.1%
N	15,098	15,754	2,971,440	2,971,440

Sources: Authors' calculations and the Public Use Micro Sample of the 2000 Decennial Census.

Notes: If a member of a couple has age or sex imputed, that couple was not included in the sample. No couples were included if a member had a reported age younger than 18. Gay and lesbian households are same-sex couples in which neither partner has an imputed marital status. Heterosexual couples include married couples (limited to couples in which one of the members of the couple is the head of household) and heterosexual partners. Data are reweighted so that the distribution of ages matches the aggregate distribution for same-sex couples.

partnerships have moderately higher wages and substantially higher income than corresponding heterosexual women. The gay male “penalty” and lesbian “premium” is also found in regression-based analyses of GSS data (Black, Makar, Sanders, and Taylor, 2003).

Panels C and D of Table 7 present some evidence concerning the source of observed income differences. The statistics for labor market participation indicate moderately lower levels of intensity for gay partnered men than heterosexual partnered men, while the opposite is true of lesbian partnered women and heterosexual partnered women. As for occupational choice, we report for working men and women the *mean percent female in occupation*, calculated by finding the percent female within each occupation and then taking the mean of these percentages over the individuals within each demographic group. We find that this statistic is higher for women than for men (of course), and we find also that gay men are in occupations that are more “typically female” than other men while lesbian women are in occupations that are less “typically female” than other women.

The patterns for lesbian women—with women in same-sex partnerships having higher levels of education, higher wages, and greater labor force attachment than women in heterosexual partnerships—are consistent with the theory of human capital accumulation and specialization within the household. Lesbian women who realize early in life that they will not marry into a traditional household will generally invest more heavily in market-oriented human capital, and will be more

likely to undertake a series of career-oriented decisions—staying in school longer, taking a major that is likely to lead to a higher-paying job, having continuous labor force attachment, or working long hours—that differ from those they would have made if they were adopting traditional gender-based household specialization.⁶ As a consequence, lesbian women have higher market earnings than other women.

Applying the theory of household specialization to gay men, we might expect that gays who realize early in life that they are unlikely to form traditional households with children may plan on specializing less intensely in market production than heterosexual men. These realizations would create differences by sexual orientation in educational choices, occupational choices, and other labor market decisions. Observations consistent with this theory are found in Tables 5, 6, and 7: In comparison to heterosexual partnered men, gay partnered men on average are more likely to take “typically female” majors and subsequently be in “typically female” occupations (which on average result in lower pay). Gay men who attend college are slightly less likely to pursue graduate education. On average, gay men report working fewer weeks per year and fewer hours per week.

On the other hand, if gay men expect to be less specialized in market production than their heterosexual counterparts, we would *not* expect gay men to have relatively higher overall levels of education. There are a number of possible countervailing forces: Young gay and lesbian people contemplating higher education may believe college campuses are a good place to meet other gays and lesbians. In fact, among medium-sized cities in the United States, those with the highest concentrations of gay and lesbian couples tend to be college towns like Madison, Ann Arbor, Lexington, Eugene, and Tucson (Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor, 2002). Similarly, gay and lesbian young adults may be less likely to have immediate family responsibilities; for example, the typical college-age gay is less likely than a similarly-aged heterosexual to already have a child. Also, some gay and lesbian people may view a higher education as a means of avoiding anticipated job-market discrimination. For example, a young gay man may choose a career in accounting (which would require a college degree) over a career in construction (with a high

⁶ Complicating matters, as Becker (1991) argues, is that many investments in human capital occur at young ages, often before sexual orientation is known by young people or their parents. As he writes in *Treatise* in one of the two explicit comments about gays or lesbians, the consequence is that “investments in children with ‘normal’ orientations reinforce their biology, and they become specialized to the usual sexual division of labor. Investments in ‘deviant’ children, on the other hand, conflict with their biology . . . For some, their biology might dominate and they would seek a deviant division of labor, with men in the household and women in the market” (p. 40). Becker emphasizes that “‘deviance’ is used only in a statistical, not in a pejorative sense,” and notes that “presumably the discrepancy between investments and biology is a source of conflict and even agony for the biologically deviant.” Our data do not reveal at what age individuals realize their sexual orientation. It seems likely, though, that lesbian women who marry, and subsequently divorce and enter into a same-sex relationship are women who did *not* plan at young ages to be in same-sex partnerships. We would expect that these women would earn less than never-married lesbian women. These are the patterns we observe in the 2000 Census data. In particular, in a regression estimated with lesbian women only ($n=15,754$), using earned income as the dependent variable and age and education dummies as control variables, never-married lesbian women are found to earn \$4300 more than women who were married (statistically significant, with a t -statistic of 6.29).

Table 8

Household Economic Characteristics, Same-Sex and Heterosexual Couples

	<i>Gay male partners</i>	<i>Lesbian partners</i>	<i>Heterosexual couples</i>
A. Mean household income	\$ 91,676	\$ 73,760	\$ 73,235
B. Household income, distribution			
5 th percentile	\$ 17,400	\$ 14,000	\$ 14,800
10 th percentile	26,100	22,000	21,900
25 th percentile	44,800	38,000	36,890
50 th percentile	71,000	61,000	58,200
75 th percentile	109,000	91,000	87,100
90 th percentile	171,500	130,300	129,500
95 th percentile	235,500	168,350	173,700
C. Mean investment income	\$ 5,165	\$ 3,359	\$ 3,068
D. Percentage who own homes			
Own free and clear	8.2%	7.4%	13.0%
Owned with mortgage	52.2	54.3	62.0
N	7,549	7,877	2,971,440

Sources: Authors' calculations and the Public Use Micro Sample of the 2000 Decennial Census.

Notes: If a member of a couple has age or sex imputed, that couple was not included in the sample. No couples were included if a member had a reported age younger than 18. Gay and lesbian households are same-sex couples in which neither partner has an imputed marital status. Married couples are limited to couples in which one of the members of the couple is the head of household. Data are reweighted so that the distribution of ages of the oldest member of the couples matches the aggregate distribution for same-sex couples.

school education) if he anticipates less discrimination in the job market for accounting.

Table 8 summarizes *household* statistics on select income and asset measures for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual families. Household income is very similar for lesbian partners and heterosexual couples. Average household income for gay male partners is approximately 25 percent higher than the average income of lesbian or heterosexual couples. Gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples alike exhibit positive assortative mating along education; Jepsen and Jepsen (2002) show this pattern with 1990 Census data and we obtain similar results with 2000 data. This pattern of individuals with higher levels of education tending to partner with others having higher levels of education, and vice versa, contributes to the wide distributions in coupled household income reported in row B of Table 8. As for assets, gay men report relatively higher levels of investment income, while home ownership is relatively lower for both gay and lesbian couples.

Concluding Remarks

A large gay studies literature highlights distinctive aspects of gay and lesbian life, underscoring the ways in which gays and lesbians differ from their heterosexual counterparts. Are people who are born with same-sex desire inherently different

from people with opposite-sex desire in fundamental motivating forces?⁷ We would argue that there are good reasons to hold that—at least along many important dimensions—they are not. People with same-sex attraction were raised alongside people with opposite-sex desire, almost always with heterosexual parents, brothers, and sisters. We all grew up in the same communities, and attended the same schools and churches. We all derive utility that is provided, as Becker (1991, p. 24) suggests, by such fundamental “commodities” as “children, prestige and esteem, health, altruism, envy, and pleasures of the senses.”

The economic approach to thinking about families—with its focus on deliberative choices made by people with reasonably stable preferences—stresses the importance of constraints. That is, when economists seek to understand systematic differences in the behavior of gays, lesbians, and heterosexuals, we do *not* start with a hypothesis of innate differences in preferences, but instead seek to understand how differences in constraints systematically alter incentives faced by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual people. This paper uses the economic approach to organize our thinking about gay and lesbian families, and thus implicitly assumes that, aside from sexual preference, other preferences do not systematically differ by sexual orientation. Based on that approach we provide evidence pertaining to some initial questions.

For example, do differing biological constraints faced by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples affect choices over children? Clearly they do; there are far fewer children in lesbian and gay families than heterosexual-partnered families. Gays and lesbians also face higher costs for adoption, which further reduces opportunities to raise children.

Do differences in fertility (or anticipated fertility), again owing to differences in constraints, influence where people live? We argue that because gay couples face a relatively high price for children, they will consume more non-child goods, and this increased consumption often takes the form of locating in expensive high-amenity locations like San Francisco or New York.

Do same-sex couples have patterns of household specialization that differ in predictable fashion from heterosexual couples? Available evidence indicates that lesbian women have higher wages and greater labor force attachment than heterosexual women, while the opposite situation pertains for gay men relative to heterosexual men. A variant of Becker’s (1991) model of household specialization would predict this pattern.

Of course, many other interesting and fundamental questions await analysis, from economics and other social science disciplines, as better data sources become available.

⁷ We use the phrase “born with” because we find compelling the arguments that same-sex desire—the key trait that leads people to form same-sex amorous relationships—is a “biological endowment” (to use a term from Posner, 1992; see Chapter 11 and the extensive references he provides). As Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) demonstrate, though, not all individuals with same-sex desire have homosexual behavior or identify as gay/lesbian/bi-sexual. This gives rise to interesting “selection” issues, which might, for example, be partly responsible for the differences in education shown in Table 6. Beyond our observations in footnote 5, we do not pursue “selection” here, but note that this matter is difficult to treat well with available data.

How do children raised in gay and lesbian families fare relative to other children along commonly measured dimensions like risky behavior, school completion, and subsequent job success? Several studies suggest that children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers do not differ from other children along key developmental outcomes (for example, Tasker, 2005), but there is little work based on sizable random samples. How does the stability of gay and lesbian families compare with heterosexual families, and how is this affected by public policy related to same-sex civil unions and marriage? To what extent are occupational differences between gay, lesbian, and heterosexual people driven by discrimination? A large literature discusses how, in theory, labor market discrimination can play out in observed wage and unemployment disparities and workplace segregation, though little formal analysis exists of disparate outcomes based on sexual orientation specifically (see, for example, Badgett, 2001, Chapter 2).⁸

Finally, sociologists and psychologists emphasize the central place of “identity” or individuals’ self-perception in many contexts, and sexual orientation identity is a major theme in the gay studies literature. “Identity” can be incorporated into economic analysis, as argued in this journal by Akerlof and Kranton (2005). It may be fruitful to adopt this approach to study gay and lesbian families and their place in society. In other words, what is the role of identity in shaping behaviors of gays and lesbians, and other people who interact with them? What is the root cause of the deep enmity many people hold for gays and lesbians, and what forces cause such attitudes and behaviors to vary across societies and to change over time? These deep questions are unlikely to find simple answers.

⁸ Although discrimination is not the focus of this essay, discrimination plays an important role in the economic lives of gays and lesbians. Many people hold negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Data from the 1998–2000 waves of the GSS indicate that 58 percent of Americans express a belief that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” it is “always wrong” or “almost always wrong.” Similarly, 21 percent of respondents indicate a man who “admits that he is homosexual” should not be allowed to teach in a college or university. (Attitudes are changing. In the 1972–82 waves of the survey, the corresponding percentage was 44 percent.) These negative attitudes spill over into the workplace. Surveys taken in the late 1980s and 1990s indicate that 16 to 30 percent of lesbian and gay people report suffering discrimination in their work lives (Badgett, 2001).

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