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Gay and Lesbian Partnership: Evidence from Multiple Surveys

Christopher Carpenter
Gary Gates

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GAY AND LESBIAN PARTNERSHIP: Evidence from Multiple Surveys*

CHRISTOPHER CARPENTER AND GARY GATES

Abstract

A large social science literature documents partnership rates and correlates of partnership among heterosexual individuals. This paper presents the first systematic empirical analysis of partnership, cohabitation, and official “domestic partner” registrations among self-identified gay men and lesbians using four independent, large, population based data sources, mostly in California. The data indicate that 30-45 percent of gay men are in a cohabiting partnership, while about 50-60 percent of lesbians are partnered. Across the four samples, white and highly educated gay men and lesbians are more likely to be partnered. We also find that almost half of partnered lesbians report being registered officially with the government, while fewer than a quarter of partnered gay men are registered. Of partnered gay men and lesbians, those who officially registered report longer relationship durations and are more likely to have ever been legally married. Overall, our results advance the literature on the determinants of household formation and provide the first estimates of factors associated with being officially registered in a same-sex domestic partnership.

*Christopher Carpenter, The Paul Merage School of Business at UC Irvine, 443 SB, Irvine, CA 92697-3125, kittc@uci.edu. Gary Gates, The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, Box 951476, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1476, gates@law.ucla.edu. We thank Dan Black and seminar participants at the JSM meetings in Toronto for helpful comments, Lance Pollock for guidance regarding UMHS data, and Larry Bye for assistance in obtaining the California Tobacco Survey data. We are grateful to the UCLA Data Access Center for assistance with the confidential CHIS data. Gates gratefully acknowledges financial support from the California Center for Population Research (NICHD Grant R24HD41022) and NICHD Grant R03HD046560. Carpenter acknowledges generous support from the UC Irvine Committee on Research Award. All opinions expressed are those of the authors only.

INTRODUCTION

A noticeable increase in social science research focusing on gay men and lesbians has occurred over the last decade. This is in large part due to the combination of intense public policy interest in gay and lesbian issues and the availability of new social science data that allow credible identification of sexual minorities. Perhaps the most widely cited data source used to explore demographic characteristics of the gay and lesbian population is the United States Decennial Census, which allows for the identification of same-sex “unmarried partners,” commonly understood as coupled gay men and lesbians, through descriptions of intra-household relationships (Black et al. 2000; Gates and Ost 2004). By construct, however, the Decennial Census cannot provide evidence on non-partnered sexual minorities; as such, the Census cannot provide evidence on partnership rates among gay men and lesbians. Black et. al. (2000) provide preliminary estimates of gay and lesbian partnership rates using the General Social Survey (GSS) and the National Health and Social Life Surveys (NHSLs), but these samples are limited by sample size constraints and inconsistent measures of sexual orientation.¹

In this paper we provide a systematic empirical analysis of partnership among self-identified gay men and lesbians by using four large, independent, population surveys. A commonality to all of our data sources is that each contains individual level information on partnership status and self-reported sexual orientation; this allows us to estimate partnership rates in each data source and examine individual demographic correlates of partnership. Specifically, we use: 1) the 1997-98 Urban Men’s Health Study (UMHS); 2) the State of California’s 2003 LGBT Tobacco Survey; 3) the 2001 and 2003 California Health Interview Surveys (CHIS); and 4) the 1997, 1999, and 2002/2003 Los Angeles County Health Surveys (LACHS). To preview,

¹ The GSS only includes measures of same-sex sexual behavior while the NHSLs has a self-reported measure of sexual orientation identity.

we estimate that 30-45 percent of gay men are in a partnership, while about 50-60 percent of lesbians are partnered. Comparing observable characteristics by partnership status, we find that gay men and lesbians in partnerships are more likely to be white and are more highly educated than their non-partnered counterparts.

Our research also provides the first evidence on previous legal marital status, relationship duration, and cohabitation length among partnered gay men and lesbians, as well as the first estimates of the fraction of partnered gay men and lesbians that are officially registered as domestic partners with the local or state government. We find registered domestic partners report longer relationship and cohabitation lengths than do gay and lesbian partners who are not officially registered. We also find that lesbians are more likely to be officially registered than are gay men (28% versus 10%), and both partnered gay men and lesbians who were previously legally married are *more* likely to be officially registered as domestic partners than partnered gay men and lesbians who were not ever legally married.

This research is important for several reasons. First, while there is a large and extensive literature on partnership and cohabitation among heterosexual individuals, there is much less research on partnership among gay men and lesbians (see Seltzer 2000 and Smock 2000 for reviews of the cohabitation literature). Second, we find broadly consistent results with respect to partnership rates and demographic characteristics across four large, independent, and representative surveys. This increases the confidence in our findings and suggests that further research on gay and lesbian partnership is possible. Third, our results on partnership duration and official registration with the government are very timely and policy relevant as cities and states address issues such as marriage or partnership rights for same-sex couples. Finally, our

results have implications for designing large scale surveys to obtain accurate information on partnership and cohabitation among gay men and lesbians.

DATA DESCRIPTION

2001 and 2003 California Health Interview Surveys

The 2001 and 2003 California Health Interview Surveys (CHIS) are telephone based random-digit dialing (RDD) surveys that were administered to over 40,000 households in California each year. We use confidential versions of these data that contain information on the respondent's self-reported sexual orientation. Specifically, one adult in each household is randomly selected to provide individual information on a variety of health conditions, health behaviors, and demographic characteristics. At the end of the "demographics" section (where age, race, and education information is elicited), adult respondents age 18-64 in the 2001 wave were asked the following, "The next question is about your sexual orientation, and I want to assure you that your answers are completely confidential. Are you gay [, lesbian,] or bisexual?".²

The CHIS also includes information on each individual's partnership status. Specifically, respondents are asked to state their marital status, and one of the choices is "living with partner." We use this information as our measure of partnership among gay men and lesbians. We note that the measure implies *cohabitation* with one's partner and therefore excludes other types of "dating" relationships where the individuals do not live together.³

² If the respondent answered "yes" but did not further make clear her sexual orientation, a follow up question was asked to differentiate between bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians. The question in 2003 was very similar. Throughout, we restrict attention to adults who reported that they did not have a problem speaking English due to concerns about question wording. See Carpenter (2005) for details.

³ Across all data sources, including the CHIS, there are a handful of gay men and lesbians who report being currently married. These individuals may be in a traditionally conceived heterosexual marriage (i.e. closeted gay men and lesbians), or they may a member of a same-sex couple in which the partners consider themselves to be married (indeed, they may be legally married in a jurisdiction that permits same-sex couples to do so).

The 1997, 1999, and 2002/2003 Los Angeles County Health Surveys

The Los Angeles County Health Surveys were random digit dialing surveys fielded by Field Research Corporation in 1997, 1999, and 2002/2003 to a representative set of households in Los Angeles County. Approximately 8,000 households in each of the three waves were surveyed. Our sample of adults age 18-60 consists of 311 gay men and 139 lesbians pooled across the three waves. To identify gay men and lesbians, we use direct responses to the following question: “Are you gay (,lesbian,) or bisexual?”. As in the CHIS, we identify partnership status in the LACHS through responses to a question about marital status. Specifically, individuals could respond that they are either “married” or “not married but living together”, as well as the other standard categories (widowed, divorced, separated, etc.). We identify individuals as “partnered” if they report they are not married but living together, which again implies cohabitation. The LACHS also includes the standard demographic characteristics such as age, race, and education.

The Urban Men’s Health Study

Conducted in 1997 and 1998, The Urban Men’s Health Study (UMHS) is a household-based telephone survey of a probability sample of men who have sex with men (MSM) living in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago (see Catania et al. 2001 for more detailed information about the data collection procedures and findings from the survey). Respondents are identified using a screening question designed to include men reporting any same-sex sexual contact since age 14 or who self identify as gay or bisexual. We restrict attention to those who

Unfortunately, the sex composition of the household is not available in the LACHS, UMHS, or CHIS. We include these individuals in the full sample across all data sources, but we do not code them as “partnered”.

self identify as gay for comparison with the other data sources in our study.⁴ The actual geographic area of the UMHS included only zip codes where MSM densities were estimated at 4 percent or higher. The UMHS also includes demographic information including age, education, and race.

UMHS did not actually collect a household roster, so identifying the group of cohabiting partners required several steps. Information was collected on the respondent and up to four of his sex partners, including a “primary” partner identified as someone the respondent was “currently in love with” or felt “a special commitment to.” Respondents were separately asked, “Do you have a relationship with a man who you would describe as your domestic partner or spouse?” Responses could include “yes” and “yes, registered as a domestic partnership.” We identify “partnered” individuals in the UMHS as men who indicated they were living with a person they identified as their “primary” partner and that they described the relationship as a domestic partnership. We did not use information on whether the partnership was registered in this case, since there was no *distinct* question about whether the relationship was registered; as such, using this information would only indirectly identify registered couples.⁵ This is in contrast to the 2003 California LGBT tobacco survey, described below, which allows us to directly infer whether the partnership is registered with the local or state government.

The 2003 California LGBT Tobacco Survey

The 2003 California LGBT Tobacco Survey was commissioned by the California Department of Health and performed by the Field Research Corporation. This survey is most similar to the

⁴ To maximize comparability across samples, we did not include 131 respondents who identified exclusively as either “Queer” or “Something else.” The LACHS and CHIS do not permit us to separately identify respondents who might have used the term “Queer”.

⁵ Only 29 of the gay-identified respondents (<2 percent) chose “yes, registered as a domestic partnership.”

UMHS in that households were screened on same-sex behavior or self-reported gay/lesbian identity. Our sample includes all adults who self identify as either “gay” or “lesbian”, which includes 876 and 280 individuals, respectively.⁶ The presence of “high density” gay/lesbian zipcodes as determined by the presence of same-sex unmarried partners in the 2000 Decennial Census played an important role in development of the sampling frame and also factored into the weighting scheme of the tobacco survey (though high density zip codes were not the only zip codes surveyed). This component of the sampling strategy must be kept in mind in the context of our partnership estimates since it is possible that the geographic distribution of sexual minorities varies according to partnership status and the Census only identifies partnered gay men and lesbians.

A key advantage of the tobacco survey relative to the other data sources is the high level of detail individuals were asked to give about current and previous partnership situations. Specifically, individuals are asked whether they have ever been legally married, as well as their current marital status. Individuals are then asked whether they have a current “primary” partner (as in the UMHS), which is explained as “someone you love more than anyone else and feel a unique commitment to”. Individuals with a current primary partner are then asked whether the partner is same-sex or opposite sex, as well as whether the individual is living with that primary partner. We use combinations of these responses to identify “partnered” individuals in the tobacco survey as respondents who report living with a same-sex primary partner. Individuals in the tobacco survey who reported living with a primary partner were also asked about the length of their cohabitation, as well as the length of the overall relationship and a battery of standard

⁶ We did not include 44 individuals who identified themselves as “Queer” and five who identified as “Questioning” in our analyses of self-identified gay men or lesbians. See footnote 4 for rationale.

demographic questions such as race, age, income, education, and the presence of children in the household.

Perhaps the most unique feature of the LGBT tobacco survey is that respondents who reported living with a same-sex partner and who also reported not being currently married were asked whether their partnership was registered with the local or state government. We use responses to this question to provide the first policy-relevant estimates of the fraction of coupled gay men and lesbians who report being officially registered as same-sex domestic partners, and we examine the relationship between observable demographic characteristics and domestic partner registration.

RESULTS: PARTNERSHIP ESTIMATES ACROSS DATA SOURCES

We begin by providing new evidence on partnership rates and demographic characteristics among self-identified gay men and lesbians across our four data sources in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. To facilitate meaningful comparisons, we recoded the demographic characteristics in each of the data into five variables: fraction partnered (as defined above for each source), fraction over age 40, fraction nonwhite, fraction with some college (but not a college degree), and fraction with at least a college degree. We restrict all the samples to adults age 18-60, and we use these comparable demographics below to estimate similar logistic regression models of the likelihood of being partnered. We also provide sample sizes for each data source, and we present weighted means. Standard errors are also adjusted for complex survey design.

The top row of Table 1 shows the estimated partnership rate across the four data sources. For the two statewide surveys in Columns 1 and 2, we find fairly similar rates of partnership among gay men: 34% for CHIS and 44% for the California LGBT tobacco survey. The estimate

for urban men in Column 4 falls near to this range (30%), although the estimate for the Los Angeles County Health Survey is noticeably lower at just 13%. All of the gay male samples are largely white, and at least half of the self-identified gay men in each data source report having at least a college degree. For lesbians in Table 2 we again find a similar partnership estimate for the two California statewide data sources in Columns 1 and 2. In the CHIS, 51% of self-identified lesbians report being partnered, while 60% of lesbians in the tobacco survey are partnered. Again, we find much lower rates of partnership in the Los Angeles County Health Survey, the same pattern we observed for gay men. Overall, the characteristics we observe in Tables 1 and 2 are generally similar to previously published estimates using the Decennial Census (Black et al. 2000), though the partnership rates are somewhat higher.

In Table 3 we further investigate the discrepancy in partnership rates for the LACHS data relative to the other data sources. For both gay men and lesbians, the LACHS data return partnership estimates that are just a quarter to a third the size of the associated California statewide samples. A natural question, then, is whether the Los Angeles subsamples of the other data return similarly small partnership rates. Pursuing this line of reasoning is limited by two factors: first, the tobacco survey does not contain geographic identifiers that can adequately identify observations from Los Angeles county; and second, the CHIS data are not designed to be representative below the state level. Despite these limitations, it is notable that a very large fraction of CHIS gay men and lesbians report living in Los Angeles county, and Los Angeles is one of just four sites for the UMHS data.

We present the relevant partnership rates for Los Angeles – and, for comparison purposes, San Francisco – in Table 3 for gay men (Column 1) and lesbians (Column 2). Notably, we find that the estimates for the San Francisco and Los Angeles subsamples of the CHIS and

UMHS data are very similar to the associated full sample estimates. The CHIS estimate for lesbian partnership in Los Angeles county, for example, is essentially identical to the full sample estimate (51%), while the CHIS estimate for gay men suggests a partnership rate of 28%. More importantly, each of the Los Angeles estimates (including the UMHS figure) is two to three times larger than the associated LACHS partnership estimate from Tables 1 and 2. We interpret the patterns in Table 3 as suggesting that the true partnership estimate for Los Angeles is higher than observed in the LACHS. Given that several of the demographic characteristics of the LACHS data are also quite different from the other three data sources, we are more confident in the partnership estimates from the two California statewide surveys and the UMHS. Note that even were we to exclude the largest observed partnership rates from the other data sources, our preferred partnership estimate would be 30-44 percent for males and 51% for females.

In Tables 4 and 5 we estimate basic logistic regression models of the likelihood of being in a partnership as a function of the observed demographic characteristics. Because we have small sample sizes of self-identified gay men and lesbians, we are more interested in broad patterns of adjusted odds ratios rather than whether any individual estimate is statistically different from zero. To that end, we shade rows in which the direction of the adjusted odds-ratios is consistent across all surveys. A finding that, say, being college educated is consistently associated with higher odds of being in a partnership across all the data sources would increase our confidence that education matters for partnership in general for gay men and lesbians.

We present these estimates in Tables 4 and 5 for gay men and lesbians, respectively. Recall that we coded the demographic variables to be consistent across data sources and limit the samples to 18-60 year olds. These models contain only four control variables, where the excluded categories are: age 40 and under, white race, and high school degree or less. In Table 4

for gay men, we find no consistent partnership pattern with respect to age. Being over 40 is associated with increased odds of partnership in the two California statewide data sources but decreased odds of partnership in the LACHS and UMHS data. In contrast, we find more consistent patterns with respect to race and education. Specifically, we estimate that nonwhite gay men have much lower odds of being in partnership than white gay men, while some college education or a college degree is associated with increased odds of being in a partnership.

For lesbians in Table 5, we find generally similar patterns. Although the LACHS suggests lower odds of partnership for lesbians over 40, the two California statewide surveys return much smaller differentials. There is stronger evidence that nonwhite lesbians have lower odds of being in partnership across all three data sources, while the evidence on education gradients in partnership is strongest for lesbians with a college degree. For both gay men and lesbians, we find it notable that the observed patterns with respect to race and education in the multivariate logistic regression framework are similar to each other given the underlying differences in sample means for the LACHS data observed in Tables 1 and 2.

It is important to note that our descriptive analyses here do not attempt to identify pathways of causality among partnership, education, and general socioeconomic status measures. We would need richer data – preferably with a longitudinal component – to disentangle whether high SES gay men and lesbians have unobserved characteristics that make them more attractive as partners or whether being in a partnership facilitates improved labor market and educational opportunities. Both of these possibilities are consistent with the observed patterns in the data that higher SES gay men and lesbians have increased odds of being in a partnership. Our goal here is to first document these patterns, although a deeper understanding of how partnership causes or is caused by better socioeconomic outcomes is an important area for further research.

RESULTS: DETAILED PARTNERSHIP EVIDENCE IN THE TOBACCO SURVEY

Having documented partnership rates across four independent, population based surveys, we now turn to detailed information on partnership duration and domestic partner registration within the California LGBT Tobacco Survey. Of the four data sources we consider, the tobacco survey provides us with the most comprehensive information on same-sex cohabiting partnerships, including the duration of the relationship, the duration of cohabitation, and whether the partnership is registered with the state or local government. This latter figure has, to our knowledge, never before been estimated using representative samples, despite its enormous policy relevance. The data also include detailed information on race, education, income, and the presence of children in the household.

In addition to being more comprehensive than the other surveys, the California LGBT tobacco survey also is the most accurate with respect to identifying partnership. Two features of the tobacco survey increase our confidence in these data. First, it is the only survey in our study that specifically asks respondents whether their partner is same-sex or opposite-sex. Because the other data sources lack a household sex roster, we have made the reasonable assumption that individuals who self-identify as gay or lesbian and who report living with a partner are, in fact, living with a *same-sex* partner. The tobacco survey allows us to explicitly exclude from our partnership estimate the small handful of gay men and lesbians who report that their primary partner is opposite-sex. Second, and more importantly, the tobacco survey is the only one in our study that asks about partnership separately from marital status.

Specifically, the other surveys identify individuals who report “living with a partner” as one of the response options to a question about current marital status. Unfortunately, these

response options need not be mutually exclusive (e.g. “living with a partner” and “divorced”). The tobacco survey, in contrast, asks about marital status and partnership separately. First, the survey asks whether the respondent has ever been legally married. Of those individuals who report having ever been legally married, the survey then asks the respondent’s marital status, intended to elicit current legal marital status. All individuals who did not report that they were currently married were then asked the question about a “primary” partner.

To see why this distinction is important, we use an illustrative example. Consider a lesbian who was once legally married to a man, subsequently obtained a legal divorce, and is now in a partnership with a woman. When asked about her current marital status in a survey like the CHIS, this woman would have two possible accurate responses: divorced or living with a partner. If she chose only “living with a partner”, she will of course show up in our CHIS partnership estimate. If she provided both responses, the CHIS directs the surveyor to only code “living with a partner”, and she would again show up in our CHIS estimate. But if – as is plausible – she indicated only that her marital status is “divorced”, she will incorrectly be coded as not in a partnership in the CHIS. In the California LGBT tobacco survey, however, she will be properly coded as in a partnership in all three scenarios. First, in the question about current legal marital status, she will indicate that she is legally divorced. And subsequently, she would be asked whether she currently has a “primary” partner, to which she would indicate “Yes” and be coded properly as both legally divorced and in a partnership. The same holds true for all gay men and lesbians who are concurrently: 1) legally divorced but currently in a partnership with someone else; 2) legally separated from their opposite-sex legal spouse but currently in a partnership with someone else; or 3) widowed but currently in a partnership with someone else.

Given that 13 percent of gay men and 28 percent of lesbians report being ever legally married, the possibility of this improved questionnaire design to increase partnership estimates is substantial. Indeed, this issue partly explains why, in Tables 1 and 2, our partnership estimates from the tobacco survey are about ten percentage points higher for both gay men and lesbians than the associated estimates from the CHIS. Specifically, when we re-code all tobacco survey respondents who report being divorced, separated, or widowed as non-partnered, the relevant partnership estimates for gay men and lesbians fall to 38% and 46%, respectively – notably lower than the full sample estimates of 44% and 60%. That the drop in the lesbian partnership estimate is larger than that for gay men is to be expected, since lesbians are much more likely to have been legally married than gay men. Overall, this suggests that surveys combining partnership with marital status in a single question can understate the true partnership rate by a substantial amount.⁷

We present detailed characteristics for the full sample of gay men and lesbians from the LGBT tobacco survey in Tables 6 and 7. These tables include means of the demographic variables for gay men and lesbians who are not currently living with a same-sex partner (Column 2), those who are currently living with a same-sex partner but not registered as domestic partners with the state or local government (Column 3), and those who are in a same-sex cohabiting partnership and registered as such with the government. Notably, we exclude from the far right columns the handful of gay men and lesbians who report that they have been legally married and are currently married because – although they reported that they are gay or lesbian – we again

⁷ It is likely that this issue also partly explains the extremely low partnership rates in the LACHS data. Recall that the CHIS directs the surveyor to code individuals reporting both “living with a partner” and “divorced” as only the former. This mitigates the degree to which the partnership/marital status problem described above can negatively impact the partnership estimate. In the LACHS data, however, it is not clear how the interviewer was directed to handle multiple responses or plausible questions by respondents about how to answer if more than one category were appropriate.

cannot identify whether their spouse is same-sex or opposite-sex. We include these men in the full sample estimates in Column 1, however, and they are also included in the denominator when we estimate partnership rates (as is true in all the data we consider).

A number of patterns for gay men in Table 6 are noteworthy. First, only a small fraction of gay men report that they have officially registered their partnership with the state or local government. While 44% of gay men are currently partnered under our definition, only 10% are officially registered. Second, we find that although only 13% of gay men have ever been legally married, this fraction is substantially *higher* for gay males who are currently in a same-sex partnership that is officially registered with the state or local government. Third, we find that partnered gay males who are registered have somewhat longer relationship durations, though the average length of the relationship and cohabitation for all partnered gay men is sizable: at least 9.7 years on average.

With respect to SES characteristics, other interesting patterns emerge. Although there is no strong age gradient in partnership, there is a strong age gradient in domestic partner registration among partnered gay men. There is also some evidence that more highly educated partnered gay men are more likely to be registered as such, though these differences are not statistically significant. Gay men in registered partnerships are more likely to be white than other gay men. We observe a household income gradient in partnership, though part of this is a mechanical household size effect; notably, however, we also observe a household income gradient in the likelihood of being registered as domestic partners. Finally, we find that gay men in registered domestic partnerships are substantially less likely to have children in their household.

We perform the same exercise for lesbians in the LGBT tobacco survey in Table 7. A number of differences relative to gay men are evident in Table 7. For example, while previous tables illustrated higher partnership rates for lesbians compared to gay men, we also find that lesbians are more likely to be registered with the government than are gay men. In fact, fully 28% of the full sample of lesbians are in same-sex partnerships that are officially registered. We also find that lesbians are much more likely to have ever been legally married than gay men. Moreover, we uncover the striking finding that, similar to gay men, lesbians in registered same-sex domestic partnerships are much *more* likely to have ever been legally married than are lesbians in partnerships that are not registered. With respect to relationship and cohabitation duration, we find somewhat lower durations compared to partnered gay men, though again we find that those in officially registered partnerships report longer relationship and cohabitation lengths. We again find little evidence of an age gradient in partnership, though there is a large age gradient in domestic partner registration. With respect to education, we find that highly educated lesbians are more likely to be partnered. Black lesbians are very unlikely to be in officially registered domestic partnerships. As with gay men, we also observe a household income gradient in partnership, though no such gradient exists with respect to being officially registered for lesbians. Finally, unlike the gay male sample, we find that partnered lesbians are much more likely to have children than non-partnered lesbians, though there is not a strong difference associated with official domestic partner registration.

The patterns of partnership, partnership registration, and duration are broadly consistent with the limited information we have about these characteristics within same-sex couples. While partnership rates are somewhat higher than those observed in Black et al. (2000), the pattern of higher rates among lesbian couples relative to their gay male counterparts is consistent. The

finding that lesbians are more likely to have been previously married than gay men is also consistent with Black et al. (2000), though they observe somewhat higher rates of prior marriage among gay men in their national samples than in what we observe in our California sample.

As we have mentioned, we believe that our estimates of partnership duration for same-sex couples represent the first using representative samples. Patterson (2000) offers a review of some of the literature that explores duration among lesbian and gay couples. Notably, our finding of slightly higher duration among gay male couples than among lesbian couples is consistent with relationship duration estimates made in studies using non-probabilistic sampling. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) used a sample of gay men and lesbians solicited from various public appearances by the authors, focusing on specific locations to maximize geographic diversity and draw from areas with different levels of social stigma related to homosexuality. They find longer relationship durations for gay men than for lesbians, with 61 percent of gay men and 78 percent of lesbians reporting relationships of less than five years. Kurdek (1988) and Kurdek (1998) use samples drawn from respondents to advertisements in gay periodicals and found average cohabitation rates of 7.5 and 10.9 years for gay men, respectively, versus 5.0 and 7.1 years for lesbians. Kurdek (2006) used the Blumstein and Schwarz data and reports mean rates of cohabitation of 5.8 years for coupled gay men and 3.9 years for lesbians.

We also observe a pattern whereby female couples are much more likely than male couples to formally register their partnerships. This is consistent with patterns in states that provide some type of formal recognition for same-sex couples. As of 5 April 2006, female couples accounted for 64 percent of the marriages of same-sex couples performed in

Massachusetts.⁸ Similarly, female couples account for two-thirds of Vermont Civil Unions (Vermont Civil Union Review Commission, 2002).⁹

DISCUSSION

The debates surrounding the legal recognition of same-sex couples, whether through marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnership registries, often suggest possible economic and legal incentives for formalizing the partnerships of gay men and lesbians. For example, Bennett and Gates (2004) suggest that marriage could provide a level of economic protection for same-sex couples with children by increasing access to some social programs (like Social Security) and to health care via employee benefit plans along with reducing tax burdens for some families. Gates et al. (2005) suggest that same-sex couples with children evidence general economic disadvantage relative to both other same-sex couples and different-sex married couples. Gates et al. (2006) observe higher rates of child-rearing among racial and ethnic minority same-sex couples in California along with particular economic disadvantages within this group.

At first glance, our findings might suggest that these potential advantages are not motivating the decisions of lesbian and gay couples to register their partnerships in California. We find that couples who opt to register tend to have higher SES and are more likely to be white. Among men, they are less likely to have children than both single gay men and those in unregistered partnerships. Notably, this pattern is the opposite for lesbians, perhaps somewhat more consistent with the suggestion that those with children gain more from formalizing their

⁸ This information was obtained through personal correspondence with the Massachusetts Registry of Vital Records and Statistics (2006).

⁹ The European experience is notably different in this regard. For example, in the first six months of the availability of civil partnership registration in England and Wales, two-thirds of the registrations have been male couples (General Register Office 2006). Similar male/female ratios occurred in Norway and Sweden (Anderson et al. 2006).

relationships. Lesbians in registered partnerships have the highest rate of childrearing (though the difference with those in non registered partnerships is very small and not significant).

Several factors could explain these seeming discrepancies between potential economic incentives and the behavior of same-sex couples. Perhaps most importantly, registered domestic partnership is not the same as marriage. It does not confer any federal benefits, nor does it include any tax benefits within California. Further, it is unclear how many lesbians and gay men are even aware of the registry. Awareness of the registration procedure and its benefits within the gay and lesbian community could be correlated with higher SES characteristics. Another possibility is that awareness could be correlated with location in urban areas, which might also be correlated with higher SES and lower rates of child-rearing among same-sex couples. Unfortunately, the limitations of our data do not permit us to deeply explore these issues.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge a key caveat related to the UMHS and the California Tobacco Survey. Both data sources were designed to be probabilistic samples of lesbians and gay men within the jurisdictions surveyed. Yet some might question the feasibility of the sampling methodology given our limited knowledge of the variation of rates of reported lesbian or gay identity within given sampling areas. These are valid criticisms. However, the extent to which many of our findings comport with other research relying on a variety of sampling strategies does suggest that while the sampling may not be perfect, these surveys offer valid insights into a population about which we know relatively little in terms of generalizable characteristics associated with partnering behavior.

CONCLUSION

This research offers many firsts—the first chance to explore partnership rates,

relationship duration, and differences between those who choose to register their partnerships and those who do not using representative samples of self-identified lesbians and gay men. More than two decades ago, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) pointed out the importance of understanding the characteristics of same-sex couples, who they correctly point out provide a critical counterfactual in the study of different-sex couples. Same-sex couples allow us to consider relationship dynamics absent gender difference and (at least in 1983) absent clearly defined social norms guiding relationship formation and development. Few researchers since have attempted to heed that sage advice. Our work represents an important advancement by providing a descriptive portrait of the basic traits associated with the partnering characteristics of lesbians and gay men from representative samples. It is our hope that these analyses will encourage future theoretical and analytical explorations not only of lesbian and gay partnering, but of marriage and cohabitation more generally.

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Table 1. Partnership rates and demographic correlates across samples, gay men age 18-60.

	(1) CHIS 2001-2003	(2) CA GLBT Tobacco Survey 2003	(3) LACHS 1997, 1999, and 2002-2003	(4) UMHS 1997-1998
Partnered	0.341 (0.021)	0.455 (0.041)	0.134 (0.020)	0.303 (0.014)
Over 40	0.400 (.021)	0.497 (.037)	0.412 (.031)	0.347 (.013)
Non-white	0.301 (0.023)	0.269 (0.031)	0.324 (0.029)	0.147 (0.009)
Some college	0.270 (0.020)	0.274 (0.036)	0.343 (0.030)	0.189 (0.011)
College degree	0.537 (0.023)	0.543 (0.052)	0.510 (0.031)	0.726 (0.012)
N	926	775	311	2,041

Table 2. Partnership rates and demographic correlates across samples, lesbians, age 18-60

	(1) CHIS 2001-2003	(2) CA GLBT Tobacco Survey 2003	(3) LACHS 1997, 1999, and 2002- 2003
Partnered	0.514 (0.029)	0.621 (0.054)	0.218 (0.037)
Over 40	0.471 (0.029)	0.543 (0.047)	0.392 (0.050)
Non-white	0.251 (0.028)	0.296 (0.044)	0.472 (0.047)
Some college	0.303 (0.026)	0.317 (0.041)	0.321 (0.044)
College degree	0.540 (0.029)	0.471 (0.055)	0.305 (0.043)
N	564	266	139

Table 3. Partnership rates in SF & LA, within California statewide samples

	(1) Males	(2) Females
Los Angeles County CHIS 2001-2003	0.281 (0.034) N=290	0.513 (0.059) N=113
Los Angeles Site UMHS 1997-1998	0.258 (0.025) N=549	--
San Francisco County CHIS 2001-2003	0.396 (0.046) N=227	0.541 (0.078) N=57
San Francisco Site UMHS 1997-1998	0.302 (0.023) N=620	--

**Table 4. Correlates of Partnership, Gay Men age 18-60
Logit Models, Adjusted Odds Ratios Reported**

	(1) CHIS 2001-2003	(2) CA GLBT Tobacco Survey 2003	(3) LACHS 1997, 1999, and 2002-2003	(4) UMHS 1997-1998
Over 40	1.11 (0.213)	1.616 (0.650)	0.558 (0.207)	0.769** (0.102)
Non-white	0.422*** (0.110)	0.600 (0.261)	0.766 (0.293)	0.660** (0.124)
Some college	1.86* (0.597)	1.093 (0.641)	2.57 (2.17)	1.32 (0.400)
College degree	2.50*** (0.720)	0.952 (0.518)	2.85 (2.27)	2.02*** (0.542)
N	926	775	311	2,041

Shaded rows show consistency in the direction of the effect across all four data sources.

Estimates utilize sample weights and standard errors are adjusted for complex survey design.

All models with multiple waves also include survey wave indicators (LACHS, CHIS). Excluded categories: Age 40 and under, white race, high school degree or less.

***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.10$ levels, respectively.

**Table 5. Correlates of Partnership, Lesbians
Logit Models, Adjusted Odds Ratios Reported**

	(1) CHIS 2001-2003	(2) CA GLBT Tobacco Survey 2003	(3) LACHS 1997, 1999, and 2002- 2003
Over 40	0.965 (0.220)	1.054 (0.546)	0.415* (0.201)
Non-white	0.426*** (0.127)	0.540 (0.271)	0.365* (0.222)
Some college	.949 (0.339)	1.411 (0.858)	1.43 (0.800)
College degree	1.52 (0.511)	3.563** (1.841)	1.46 (1.04)
N	564	266	139

Shaded rows show consistency in the direction of the effect across all three data sources.

Estimates utilize sample weights and standard errors are adjusted for complex survey design.

All models with multiple waves also include survey wave indicators (LACHS, CHIS). Excluded categories: Age 40 and under, white race, high school degree or less.

***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, and $p < 0.10$ levels, respectively.

Table 6. Detailed characteristics, 2003 California LGBT Tobacco Survey, Gay Males

	(1) All gay males	(2) Gay males not currently living with a same-sex partner	(3) Gay males currently living with a same-sex partner but not registered as domestic partners with local or state government	(4) Gay males currently living with a same-sex partner and registered as domestic partners with local or state government
Currently partnered (cohabiting)	0.44 (0.037)	--	--	--
Registered as domestic partners	0.10 (0.024)	--	--	--
Ever married	0.13 (0.016)	0.10 (0.026)	0.12 (0.035)	0.21* (0.051)
How long been together?	--	--	11.0 (1.638)	13.6 (1.795)
How long lived together?	--	--	9.7 (1.654)	12.3 (1.968)
Age	42.0 (1.179)	41.3 (1.764)	41.5 (2.535)	46.7* (2.733)
HS or less	0.17 (0.040)	0.19 (0.056)	0.17 (0.063)	0.08 (0.043)
Some college	0.28 (0.034)	0.26 (0.039)	0.31 (0.042)	0.33 (0.145)
Bachelors degree	0.36 (0.037)	0.37 (0.045)	0.34 (0.063)	0.31 (0.061)
Masters/PhD	0.19 (0.023)	0.18 (0.031)	0.18 (0.037)	0.27 (0.091)
Hispanic	0.16 (0.028)	0.17 (0.044)	0.17 (0.075)	0.05** (0.032)
White	0.75 (0.030)	0.69 (0.059)	0.80 (0.050)	0.88** (0.052)
Black	0.05 (0.025)	0.08 (0.042)	0.01 (0.008)	0.01 (0.013)
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.07 (0.018)	0.08 (0.026)	0.05 (0.030)	0.06 (0.038)
Household income at least \$75,000	0.47 (0.041)	0.32 (0.051)	0.60** (0.090)	0.78*** (0.070)
Any kids under 18 in HH	0.10 (0.034)	0.14 (0.057)	0.06 (0.027)	0.02* (0.013)
N	876	546	199	114

Notes:

All means are weighted with standard errors adjusted for survey design.

Respondents included in Cols. (2)-(4) do not include 17 observations of gay men included in Col (1). These men report being currently married but we are unable to determine the sex of their spouses.

* Difference with Col (2) is significant at the p<0.10 level

** Difference with Col (2) is significant at the p<0.05 level

*** Difference with Col (2) is significant at the p<0.01 level

Table 7. Detailed characteristics, 2003 California LGBT Tobacco Survey, Lesbians

	(1) All lesbians	(2) Lesbians not currently living with a same-sex partner	(3) Lesbians currently living with a same-sex partner but not registered as domestic partners with local or state government	(4) Lesbians currently living with a same-sex partner and registered as domestic partners with local or state government
Currently partnered	0.60 (0.056)	--	--	--
Registered as domestic partners	0.28 (0.047)	--	--	--
Ever married	0.28 (0.046)	0.30 (0.094)	0.11* (0.035)	0.41 (0.081)
How long been together?	--	--	8.1 (1.268)	10.6 (1.944)
How long lived together?	--	--	7.3 (1.296)	9.7 (1.966)
Age	41.7 (1.072)	40.0 (1.265)	40.5 (1.928)	45.2* (2.156)
HS or less	0.21 (0.034)	0.32 (0.038)	0.08*** (0.051)	0.21 (0.090)
Some college	0.32 (0.043)	0.40 (0.055)	0.37 (0.092)	0.16** (0.076)
Bachelors degree	0.20 (0.039)	0.15 (0.035)	0.26 (0.058)	0.19 (0.075)
Masters/PhD	0.26 (0.040)	0.11 (0.041)	0.29** (0.074)	0.44*** (0.103)
Hispanic	0.16 (0.049)	0.22 (0.045)	0.08** (0.034)	0.18 (0.086)
White race	0.72 (0.042)	0.63 (0.050)	0.76 (0.076)	0.80 (0.087)
Black race	0.09 (0.023)	0.11 (0.027)	0.14 (0.077)	0.01*** (0.014)
Asian/Pacific Islander race	0.03 (0.014)	0.05 (0.033)	0.02 (0.016)	0.01 (0.006)
Household income at least \$75,000	0.44 (0.065)	0.15 (0.069)	0.60*** (0.083)	0.61*** (0.096)
Any kids under 18 in HH	0.25 (0.041)	0.16 (0.052)	0.29 (0.084)	0.31* (0.086)
N	280	128	71	69

Notes:

All means are weighted with standard errors adjusted for survey design.

Respondents included in Cols. (2)-(4) do not include 12 observations of lesbians included in Col (1). These women report being currently married but we are unable to determine the sex of their spouses.

* Difference with Col (2) is significant at the p<0.10 level

** Difference with Col (2) is significant at the p<0.05 level

*** Difference with Col (2) is significant at the p<0.01 level