

## Does it Even Count? LGBTQ Data and the 2020 Census

For years LGBTQ advocates, researchers, and federal agency leaders have urged the Census Bureau to add sexual orientation/gender identity questions to the decennial U.S. Census to deepen overall understandings of the LGBTQ community. While many had waited in hopes that the 2020 Census would include questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity—many were dismayed to find that, again, the LGBTQ community would not be holistically counted among the ranks.

The good news is that the Census will now ask a direct question regarding same-sex couples. It does so by asking respondents to further define relationships. When answering questions regarding a respondent's partner, they will be able to select between the following response choices (<https://www.npr.org/2018/03/30/598192154/2020-census-will-ask-about-same-sex-relationships>):

- Opposite-sex husband/wife/spouse
- Opposite-sex unmarried partner
- Same-sex husband/wife/spouse
- Same-sex unmarried partner

While this will shed some light on issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, it will only shed light on those in same-sex relationships—a *bittersweet step in the right direction*.

With more pointed questions regarding the nature of relationships, the quality of data regarding same-sex couples will be undoubtedly higher. However, because the question is strictly limited to relationships, the most important data points surrounding gender identity or sexual orientation will continue to remain unobservable. For example, though researchers may observe a population of 8,076 same-sex couples in Louisiana, they will be unable to answer deeper questions surrounding identity. For example, how many of those individuals are bisexual? Transgender? Queer? In total, how many exist in Louisiana? Furthermore, the response choices fail to acknowledge and recognize individuals who may exist outside of the gender binary, i.e. those who identify as intersex or non-binary.

As the Housing and Urban Development Department states in a 2016 letter to the Census Bureau (<https://www.npr.org/2017/06/20/533542014/collecting-lgbt-census-data-is-essential-to-federal-agency-document-shows>), "Valid and reliable measures are essential to the accurate reporting of overall LGBTQ status and to the ultimate usefulness of data." HUD and other federal agencies have asserted the need for what they call "basic information on LGBTQ prevalence."

This statement speaks to the high need for accurate measures of the LGBTQ community. Without this data, society has only scratched the surface of its understanding of this population. Key insights into areas like LGBTQ employment, identity, and even relative population size, inform how others think about the LGBTQ community and the unique challenges it faces in the United States.

The lack of comprehensive federal data is, in fact, a common limitation in LGBTQ research. Unlike other demographic data, such as race or age, the decennial U.S. Census does not collect information regarding sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, very few national surveys exist that have the ability to produce comprehensive data surrounding the LGBTQ community. While important trends regarding race and age may be observed through the analysis of U.S. Census data, the same cannot be said for data regarding the LGBTQ community.

The American Community Survey (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about.html>) (ACS) is an ongoing annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that collects information from roughly 3 million households to determine how to allocate government funding. To date, the ACS is one of the few comprehensive federal surveys that can be used to observe patterns regarding same-sex couples as it contains a variable identifying whether or not the respondent is married to a partner of the same sex. However, the variable, same-sex married couple (SSMC), is not obtained through a direct question, but rather ascertained through an analysis of several

responses to survey questions. Reputable research entities, such as The Williams Institute, use the SSMC variable to analyze important trends (like average household income) for same-sex couples. However, because these observations cannot be applied to the broader LGBTQ community, federal data limits more profound observation.

While the addition of a direct question defining same-sex relationships in the decennial Census will undoubtedly increase the quality and level of data observed in this specific area, it falls short in meeting the overall goal of obtaining comprehensive LGBTQ data on a national level.

The continued lack of LGBTQ data further highlights the importance of collecting Self-ID data in your own company. Being counted matters. LGBTQ data informs important choices—it informs policies, it informs budget allocation, it informs the way business is conducted. Furthermore, data informs our overall understanding of a particular problem—in this case, LGBTQ workplace equality. The more we understand about the disparities and marginalization faced by the LGBTQ community, the better equipped we are to design solutions. As far as the Census goes, there is more work to be done at the federal level to ensure that LGBTQ individuals are counted—truly counted. The new question addition is clearly this is a step in the right direction, but the journey continues.

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