

The Geography of Civil Union Households

GLEN ELDER

University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, United States

ESTHER D. ROTHBLUM

San Diego State University, San Diego, California, United States

SONDRA E. SOLOMON

University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, United States

Geographers and social scientists more generally have studied and located the lives of gay men and lesbians for well over 20 years now. However, the particular visibilities and invisibilities of gay life that geographers have mapped have only been possible if scholars created their own data, either by way of interviews or manipulating census data so as to create surrogates for gay and lesbian households. The move throughout the United States and several Western countries to solemnize gay and lesbian relationships through civil union, marriages, or domestic partnerships has also created a new source of data by which to track and map particular kinds of gay and lesbian lives. By way of an example, this article seeks to map the lives of gay men and lesbian women who undertook Vermont civil unions in 2000. The results show that very little geographical difference exists between the lives of homosexual and heterosexual coupled households throughout the United States.

KEYWORDS *Gay and lesbian households, civil unions, geography of sexuality*

Where do lesbian and gay families reside in the United States? Certain localities come to mind immediately as gay enclaves; these include San Francisco, Provincetown, Key West, and Northampton. In their book about U.S. sexual practices, Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) speculate that the best way to find gay men in the United States is to focus on the 10 largest cities. While geographers in particular have questioned the urban bias of

Address correspondence to Esther D. Rothblum, Women's Studies Department, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182. E-mail: erothblu@mail.sdsu.edu

some of this research (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Knopp, 2004), there remains a pervasive sense that gays and lesbians are best understood when they are either out and, therefore, easily identifiable or congregate in large enough concentrations. What does this assume?

The assumption is that finding gay men and lesbians is an exercise that should be carried out by noticing them on the landscape. This presents somewhat of a methodological conundrum for researchers because it assumes a level of visibility that may not be possible for all gays and lesbians, particularly those who are closeted or may not live in high enough concentrations to be found or noticed. In fact, the idea that gays and lesbians can be counted only when visible is highly problematic, and it is surprising that this basic methodological point has received so little attention by those seeking to understand the lives of what remains a largely invisible minority. Michael Brown and Paul Boyle have problematized finding homosexual households using national census data (Brown, 2000). What they show is that, at best, we have only been able to create surrogate household data which may well over- or under-count homosexual lives because census material does not ask gay and lesbian citizens to identify as such. As a result, and to date, we have produced a body of literature about homosexual lives that tends toward the exceptional. These kinds of exceptional studies that mark gay and lesbian lives as visibly different have also made it particularly difficult to compare gay and lesbian households with heterosexual households because what is being compared, at best, are in fact particular kinds of visible concentrated gay and lesbian households with heterosexual households.

A burgeoning body of literature, however, has come to question how different gay and lesbian households really are. Kurdek (2004, 2006) has argued that while heterosexual and homosexual households confront different responses to their gendered compositions, within the household itself differences are far more difficult to discern. This article seeks to build on his observation by arguing, through the use of civil union data collected in Vermont in 2000, that very few geographical differences exist between gay, lesbian, and heterosexual households.

Until recent years, quantitative studies of lesbians and gay men mostly used convenience samples (e.g., questionnaires were distributed at gay/lesbian bookstores, bars, or organizations, or ads were placed in gay/lesbian newsletters; see Rothblum (2007) for an overview of sampling methods). These sources yielded hundreds of lesbian and gay participants, but had few heterosexual participants or subscribers, so researchers often compared lesbians and gay men with published norms about the general population (presumed to be mainly heterosexual). Such comparisons found demographic differences. Specifically, participants in lesbian and gay convenience studies tended to live in urban settings, have high levels of education, earn incomes that were low relative to their educational level, and not belong to religious organizations (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Morris &

Rothblum, 1999). Because larger cities are more likely to have lesbian/gay bars, bookstores, and other organizations, these studies were critiqued for focusing on members of an urban lesbian and gay subculture. It is also likely that more educated people subscribe to newsletters and magazines and that poorer people cannot afford to attend lesbian or gay events. Thus, the demographic results may have the result of sampling bias.

More recently, technological advances such as random-digit-dialing telephone surveys and Web-based surveys have permitted more representative research methods. However, this has presented a new challenge for researchers—extremely large sample sizes are necessary in order to obtain even small numbers of lesbian and gay male participants. For example, Laumann and colleagues (1994) interviewed close to 3,500 individuals using representative telephone sampling. Only 24 women and 49 men in this sample identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other. Laumann and colleagues considered this sample size too small to analyze, so the results were published for heterosexuals only.

Given the negative stigma of being lesbian or gay, it is obvious that many individuals refuse to participate in research studies because they are closeted or fear negative repercussions if their identity is made known in any way. This may be why urban samples (which have more anonymity than those in small towns) and participants with more privilege (higher education and income) are more likely to respond. Furthermore, research studies overwhelmingly consist of European-American participants. It is possible that individuals who are members of two oppressed groups (racial and ethnic as well as sexual minorities) may be at far greater risk for discrimination and thus less likely to trust researchers (see Greene, 1994, for a review of this literature).

In the summer of 2000, Vermont became the first U.S. state to legalize same-sex relationships in the form of civil unions (see Moats, 2004, for an overview). At that time no other U.S. states or Canadian provinces had similar legislation, so couples from all over the United States (and some other nations, including Canada) traveled to Vermont to be united in civil unions. Moreover, civil union certificates (similar to heterosexual marriage certificates) were public information, so it was possible to have access to data from the entire civil union population. This meant that we could analyze data from all couples, no matter how closeted. Unlike prior research, it was not a convenience sample but a large, national population of same-sex couples, although with a major focus on New England states.

Our prior research (Henehan, Rothblum, Solomon, & Balsam, 2007; Rothblum, Balsam, Solomon, & Factor, 2007; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004, 2005; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005) has focused on psychological and relationship factors among the civil union couples. In addition, Coulmont (2005) has mapped civil union couples by U.S. state. The purpose of the present analysis was to map where same-sex couples in

the United States who had civil unions during the first year of the legislation (July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2001) reside, and to overlay these data on a feature class of U.S. census tracts. This allows comparison of the census tracts where civil union couples live with national averages. Our focus was on population density, race/ethnicity, age, household composition, and home ownership.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The second and third authors obtained photocopies of all 2,475 civil union certificates from the period July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2001, the first year that this legislation began, from the Vermont Office of Vital Records of the Vermont Department of Health. Based on information on the certificates, only 21% of the couples were from Vermont, two-thirds of couples were female, and 10% of individuals were members of ethnic minority groups. Names and addresses of all couples were typed into a Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheet.

ESRI's ArcGIS 9.0 was used for all Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis. The GIS analysis allowed us to overlay census data onto spatial data (U.S. zip codes and census tracts) and undertake some rudimentary statistical analysis using spatial data. A feature class of U.S. zip codes was overlaid on a feature class of U.S. census tracts. The table of civil union couples was joined to the U.S. zip codes layer, using zip codes as the joining attribute. After this join, a select by location was used to select the U.S. census tracts that contained zip codes of civil union couples. This selection was then exported as its own feature class. This allowed us to compare the census tracts of civil union couples with national averages and run regressions between our data and the national data.

This method provided us with an accurate spatialized account of the census context from which civil union couples came. The percentage of each census attribute was then calculated for each census tract and compared with national averages. The average of the percentage of each census attribute was used as the summarizing number for that attribute. The average percentages of all the U.S. census tracts were compared to the average percentages of the U.S. census tracts that contained civil union couples.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows a basic locational map of gay and lesbian couples who sought out civil unions in 2000. As would be expected, these results have a Northeast bias, as most gays and lesbians who entered into civil unions in Vermont did so by traveling from neighboring New England states. It should also be noted that large numbers of gays and lesbians also traveled from highly populated,

The Number of Vermont Civil Union Households
per State in the United States of America

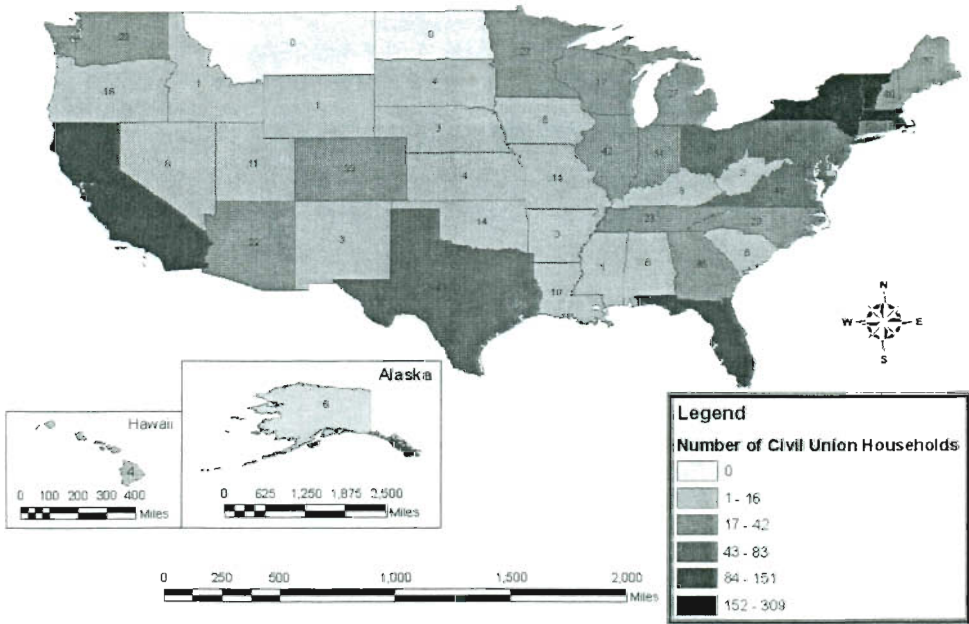


FIGURE 1 Geographical Distribution by State of Gay and Lesbian Households Seeking Vermont Civil Unions in 2000.

large states such as California and Texas. However, when we control for population size by asking how many households sought out civil unions as a percentage of all households in the state, a slightly different picture emerges (see Figure 2). In fact, what emerges again is the highly localized and regional effect that Vermont civil unions made. While there appears to be a highly regionalized effect, what is most interesting about the results is that lesbian and gay male couples who entered into Vermont civil unions do not differ much from heterosexual households. In other words, when we compared the kinds of neighborhoods in which all gays and lesbians in the sample lived with the lives of U.S. citizens generally, we found almost no difference at all. What follows here is an explanation of how we arrived at these arguably remarkable unremarkable findings.

Civil union households appear to be in slightly more populated tracts than the national average, but not to the extent that they are portrayed in the media or even in academic work on the geography of gay and lesbian lives. That is, while some lesbian and gay male civil union couples possibly do live in gay ghettos, many in our sample (see Figure 3) live in geographically dispersed towns and cities of varying sizes across the nation. Clearly the couples who entered into civil union partnerships were also concentrated,

The Number of Vermont Civil Union Households per Total State Population

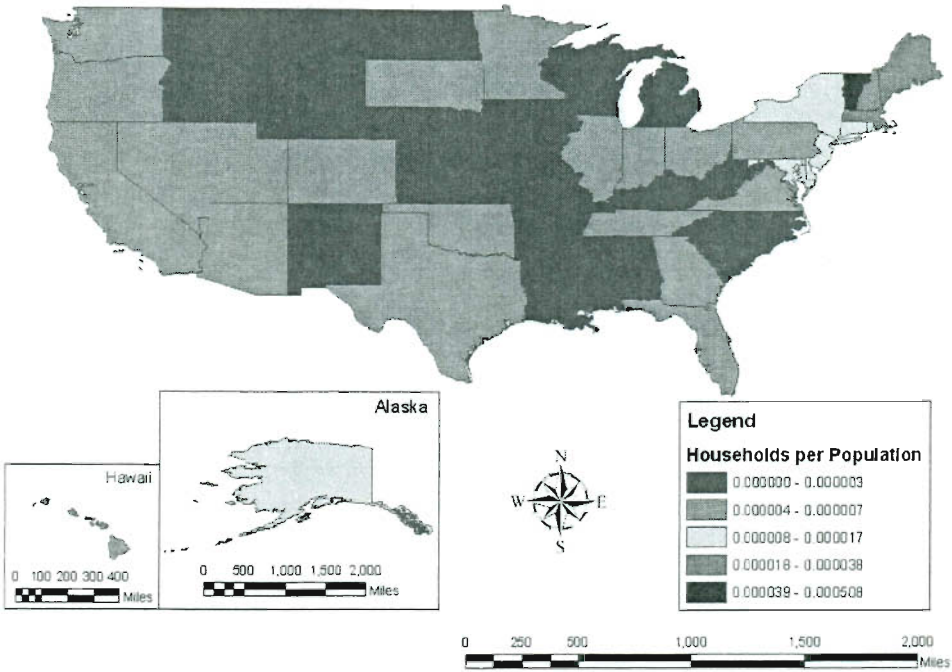


FIGURE 2 Lesbian and Gay Households Seeking Vermont Civil Unions as a Percentage of State Population.

in some respects, in the Northeast, as the maps below suggest, and there certainly does appear to be somewhat of an urban bias to the results. Yet gay men and lesbians also live in a variety of settings and locales across the nation.

Once located within their corresponding census tracts, we were able to compare our national sample with the national census tracts and arrived at surprising results that tended to suggest that this particular set of gay men and lesbians were more like the U.S. national population than not (see Table 1).

Broken down by age cohort, we did not find much difference between civil union tracts and national averages. Civil union households appear to reside in slightly whiter tracts than the national average. However, when broken down further by specific race/ethnicity, it appears that civil union tracts are less likely to be African American (8% versus 13% for national tracts) or Hispanic (7.9% versus 11% for national tracts) but more likely to be Asian-American (8% versus 3% for national tracts).

Civil union households are slightly smaller and slightly older than the national household average. People living in civil union households also live in households that generally have the same number of married households

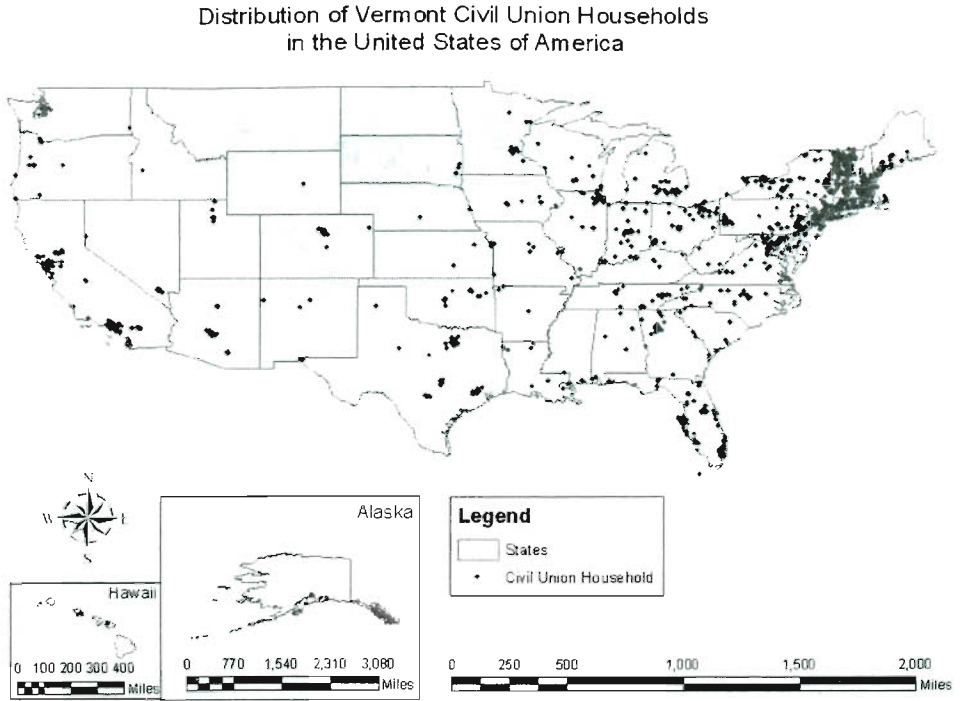


FIGURE 3 Locational Distribution of Lesbian and Gay Households Seeking Vermont Civil Unions in 2000.

as the rest of the country. Finally, we found a very slight variation when comparing rental versus home ownership rates. Civil union households have a slightly greater chance of residing in neighborhoods that have higher rates of renting, but even this difference is very slight.

TABLE 1 Comparison of Gay and Lesbian Vermont Civil Union Households with National Household Averages

Census Variable	National Averages	Averages of CU Household Tracts
Population	4306	5134
% multiracial	2%	4%
% black	13.7%	8%
% Asian	3%	8%
% Hispanic	11%	7.9%
Sex ratios m:f	49.1:50.9	49.1:50.9
Median age	35.9	37.0
	Men: 34.7	Men: 36
	Women: 37.1	Women: 38.1
Average family size	3.1	3.0
Average household size	2.6	2.5
Married households without children	27.7	26.6
Married households with children	23.3	21.5
Rental: homeownership	31.3:60	35.1:57.2

We can interpret these data in many ways. First, it is possible that convenience samples target lesbians and gay men who differ significantly from the mainstream by focusing on magazine subscribers (who may be more out, more educated, etc.) and members of gay organizations (who may live in more urban areas) and are thus providing a skewed sample of sexual minorities. In contrast, our data set may focus on a more representative group of lesbians and gay men, who are not that different demographically from heterosexuals.

On the other hand, same-sex couples who choose to have civil unions may in fact differ substantially from other lesbian and gay male couples. Many same-sex couples who could have legalized relationships in the United States today choose not to do so. This may be because the benefits are only at the state level and, thus, minor, or because they are politically opposed to marriage-like relationships (see Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003, for a theoretical review of this debate). Those same-sex couples who do choose to legalize their relationship via civil unions, domestic partnerships or marriage may be more traditional and consequently more similar to heterosexuals. That is, they may choose to live closer to their family of origin, for example, than move to a large city with a thriving gay community. Or they may select a neighborhood for the quality of its schools for their children instead of its cultural events.

Finally, this data set focused exclusively on lesbians and gay men in couples. This omits unpartnered lesbians and gay men, those who are in casual or dating relationships, or those whose partner has died. Thus the results cannot be generalized to all lesbians and gay men.

In sum, the present study points out the usefulness of comparing lesbian and gay male data sets to national census data and certainly helps to complicate our understandings about the myriad ways in which gays and lesbians live and where they choose to do so. It is highly likely the sample of gay men and lesbian women who chose to sign Vermont civil union contracts and who reside outside of Vermont did so for symbolic rather than material reasons, because they receive no material benefits if the household is located outside of the state. What we might conclude from this geographical fact then is that slightly different and further complicated differences separate out the lives of gay and lesbian Vermonters who entered into civil unions versus gay and lesbian couples who traveled from other parts of the United States. For Vermonters, the extension of the state benefits of marriage (inheritance rights, hospital visitation rights, health care benefits) may well have entered into their decision to sign civil union contracts. For those who don't live in Vermont, however, the reasons for entering into a civil union remain less clear.

Despite the geographically specific differences that may have induced gay men and lesbians to enter into civil unions, what we can say is that our sample is not that different from the national average data. In other words,

this particular group of gay men and lesbians is more like the rest of the country than not. This does not mean that all gays and lesbians exhibit no differences whatsoever (although it might), but what it does mean is that for now we can say that gays and lesbians who aspire toward the symbolic and real material benefits of marriage are no different from other people who aspire toward domestic stability and material comfort.

As the civil union and domestic partnership movement has emerged in other states across the United States after the institution was created in Vermont in 2000 and gay marriage licenses have been granted by a few states, it is clear that particular kinds of gay and lesbian households are choosing to formalize their partnerships and find expression through the legal frameworks that are being made available to them. In light of these formal arrangements we are also able to see and analyze the lives of gay men and lesbians in ways that have been impossible to date because atomistic gay and lesbian households have been impossible to map. In light of civil unions, domestic partnerships, and same-sex marriage movements, we are beginning to see that diverse public and private geographies are associated with the lives of gay men and lesbians, rendered visible through more than mapping their geographical concentrations.

While the formalization of gay and lesbian cohabiting households has produced passionate debate within and without the GLBTQ community, it has also created a unique possibility for those interested in marking and analyzing queer life. The shortcoming of this approach, however, is that it remains only cohabiting gay men and lesbians who are rendered visible. As gay men and lesbians come out at younger ages and live to be older than has been the case before, social scientists will still need to find ways to measure and analyze men and women who are not legally registered as cohabiting couples.

While gay men and lesbians are slowly receiving the rights of privileges of state-citizenship through civil unions and state-sanctioned gay marriages, what remains to be seen is whether these gains will translate into full national citizenship rights, including the right to receive federal benefits as gay men and lesbians and the right to be counted as such. Furthermore, what also remains to be seen is whether these rights will be granted to gays and lesbians as individuals rather than members of legally sanctioned households.

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