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Children of parents who have same-sex relationships: New study

By Andrea Mrozek, Manager of Research and Communications, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

On June 11, 2012, sociologist Mark Regnerus at the Population Research Center at the University of Texas released a new study called *How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study*. [1] The study compares “how the young-adult children of a parent who has had a same-sex romantic relationship fare on 40 different social, emotional, and relational outcome variables when compared with six other family-of-origin types.” [2]

South of the border, there has been much discussion over this important, methodologically sound study. [3] There has been a virtual blackout on information in Canada.

What distinguishes this study from prior research on the same topic is the study sample, which is nationally representative, large and random. [4] Regnerus screened over 15,000 Americans age 18-39 and asked “if their biological mother or father ever had a romantic relationship with a member of the same sex.” Regnerus understands that one same-sex relationship “does not a lesbian make” but clarifies he asked this particular question because he “was less concerned with the complicated politics of sexual identity than with same-sex behaviour.” [5]

From this he found 175 children raised in homes where the mother experienced lesbian relationships and 73 children raised in homes where the father experienced gay relationships. Of the 175 adult children with lesbian mothers, two reported that they lived with their mothers for their whole childhood. [6] Children in families with mothers and fathers who experienced same-sex romantic relationships were then contrasted with other categories, including intact biological, adopted, divorced, step families, single parents and “other” families (which might include deceased parents, for example). [7]

Study outcomes

Children raised in homes where the parents engaged in same-sex relationships were more likely than their counterparts in intact biological families to:

- Experience poor educational attainment
- Report overall lower levels of mental and physical health
- Be in counseling or mental health therapy
- Suffer from depression
- Have recently thought of suicide (statistical significance exists only for children of fathers in same-sex relationships)
- Be sexually molested (both inappropriate touching and forced sexual act)
- Be unemployed or part-time employed as young adults
- Have pled guilty to non-minor legal offenses
- Live in homes with lower income levels (statistical significance only for children of mothers in same-sex relationships)

A full list of outcomes can be found in the study.

The study does not attempt to address why these children experience poorer outcomes; it does not assert causality. The study did control for a number of factors, including the respondent's age, race/ethnicity, gender, the mother's education, perceived family-of-origin income, and whether or not the subject was bullied. However, readers are free to ask why these results occurred, and as the debate rages in the United States, we can see that many are doing precisely that.

A couple of conclusions can be drawn safely:

- Prior conclusions about children faring the same or better in homes with lesbian mothers and/or gay fathers are premature

The mainstream media has been only too happy to report studies with different results, suggesting that the children of gay and lesbian parents are no different, certainly not worse and in some cases better off. [8] However, these conclusions are premature because many of the existing studies on same-sex parents are not methodologically sound. Regnerus points out that these studies are "based on non-random, non-representative data often employing small samples that do not allow for generalization to the larger population of gay and lesbian families." This is confirmed by another article in the same issue of *Social Science Research* by Loren Marks, a PhD in family studies at Louisiana State University, who reviews the American Psychological Association's brief about lesbian and gay parenting. [9]

- There is a greater diversity in the experience of gay parenting than has been previously thought

Examining a large, national study sample reveals that contrary to existing stereotypes, parents experiencing same-sex relationships are not all white and upper-middle-class. As co-author of the new book *Debating Same-Sex Marriage* Maggie Gallagher puts it: "It turns out very few of these relationships look like *Modern Family*." [10] Writes the Witherspoon Institute, which funded the study in part: "[I]n response to questions about race, 48% of the respondents with a [gay father], and 43% of the respondents with a [lesbian mother] indicated that there were either black or Hispanic, a number much higher than previously found by studies based on convenience samples." [11]

- Statistically, there are differences in outcomes for kids raised in different family forms

There are many ways to parent, and to every rule there are exceptions, thankfully. Nonetheless, we should be free to comment on what the data says. The realm of social science research has established the married, two-parent family as being the gold standard for children. Sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, authors of *Growing Up With A Single Parent*, wrote this about parenting and children: "If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children's basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent family ideal." [12] To date, the most statistically valid studies have shown that married biological parent families have the best outcomes. Continued research is necessary to understand this even better.

How children fare in different family forms is an obviously sensitive area of research because parents of all kinds are seeking to do the best they can. However, it is a valid area of inquiry. This study represents one of the best efforts we have to date on this difficult topic. The study has limitations but nonetheless, to ignore it is to turn a blind eye to the sometimes troubling lived experiences of adult children who were raised by parents in same-sex relationships.

Endnotes

[1] Regnerus, M. (2012, June 10). How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study. *Social Science Research*, Vol. 41, Issue 4, pp. 752-770. Retrieved [here](#).

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] **Largely positive commentaries about the study include:**

[Canadian professor Doug Allen in *National Review*](#)

[William Saletan in *Slate*](#)

Largely negative commentaries about the study include:

[Box Turtle Bulletin](#)

[John Corvino in *The New Republic*](#)

[4] The same issue of *Social Science Research* includes a literature review of the research on same-sex parenting, concluding that “not one of the 59 studies referenced in the 2005 APA Brief compares a large, random, representative sample of lesbian or gay parents and their children with a large, random, representative sample of married parents and their children. The available data, which are drawn primarily from small convenience samples, are insufficient to support a strong generalizable claim either way. Such a statement would not be grounded in science. To make a generalizable claim, representative, large-sample studies are needed—many of them.”

From Marks, L. (2012, June 10). Same-sex parenting and children’s outcomes: A closer examination of the American Psychological Association’s brief on lesbian and gay parenting. *Social Science Research*, Vol. 41, Issue 4, pp. 735-751. Retrieved [here](#).

[5] Regnerus, M. (2012, June 11). Queers as folk: Does it really make no difference if your parents are straight or gay? *Slate*. Retrieved [here](#).

[6] That only two adult children reported that they lived with their mothers for their whole childhood can be found here: Regnerus, M. (2012, June 10). Q&A with Mark Regnerus about the background of his new study. *Patheos*. Retrieved [here](#).

[7] Regnerus, M. (2012, June 10). How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships?

[8] For just one example, see Balkissoon, D. (2011, November 4). The seven habits of highly effective lesbian families. *The Globe and Mail*.

The author writes: “A series of studies in Canada and elsewhere over the past decade has found that the children of lesbians aren't just well-adjusted – they excel. On average, kids with two moms seem to be more confident and less aggressive than those raised by a mom and a dad. They are open-minded, affectionate and less susceptible to anxiety and depression.”

[9] Marks, L. (2012, June 10). Same-sex parenting and children’s outcomes: A closer examination of the American Psychological Association’s brief on lesbian and gay parenting. See also footnote 4.

[10] Gallagher, M. (2012, June 12). The best or the worst of all possible gay-parenting studies? *National Review Online*. Retrieved [here](#).

[11] Samuel, A. (2012, June 14). The kids aren’t all right: New family structures and the “no differences” claim. *Public Discourse*, The Witherspoon Institute. Retrieved [here](#).

[12] McLanahan, S. and Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hinders, what helps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 38.

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