



Our families count

July 21, 2008
Jaime Grant

Last week, the U.S. Census Bureau announced it will not count legally married lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) same-sex couples in its 2010 data collection effort. Instead, LGBT spouses will be counted as "unmarried partners." This political move to annul the marriages of LGBT same-sex couples in Massachusetts and California follows a history of allowing politics to trump science in federal data collection efforts.

The Census has long rendered invisible or less valuable certain segments of the population to fit the political whims of the day. The U.S. Census was founded at the signing of the Constitution, when the worth of any black citizen was officially recorded as 3/5ths of a person. The Census' dehumanization of black Americans was a critical underpinning of a system that held slavery as natural and essential to the social and economic well-being of the nation.

Today, African American and Latino citizens are routinely undercounted, as the Census' reliance on a door-to-door headcount typically fails to record Americans living in poverty, those who take part in mobile workforces, and Americans whose communities have been targeted for state intervention and incarceration. These undercounts have significant consequences in the distribution of federal resources and in the development of public policy that addresses the needs of all people in the country.

Same-sex couples became unavoidably visible in the 1990 Census when the federal government added "unmarried partner" to its list of family configurations, as a nod to the growing numbers of heterosexual partners who were choosing to cohabitate and raise children without marrying. The combination of "unmarried partner" check-offs in households that also checked off two adults of the same sex created a visible record of same-sex couples for the first time in U.S. history. Researchers and advocates alike seized on this data set because it remains one of the only federal collection efforts that recognizes and describes the socio-economic reality of same-sex couples and their families. In fact the US Census is generally considered the gold standard in data collection.

The "unmarried partner" snapshot of the LGBT community provided by the Census flies in the face of right wing portraits of the community as white, male, urban, affluent and hedonistically devoid of family responsibilities. In 2000, the Census found LGBT same-sex couples living in 97% of all U.S. counties. The data also showed that African American and Latino/a same-sex couples are raising twice as many children as white same-sex couples, with black couples earning on average \$10,000 less than their heterosexual peer households. One wonders what other myths might be exploded if there were LGBT signifiers on any of the other, thousands of federal survey instruments that record the social and economic realities of American citizens on a daily basis.

If the Bush administration plans for the Census are carried out, married LGBT couples will be intentionally erased by the 2010 Census. While we should not be surprised by the intentions of an

administration that has consistently attempted to roll back civil rights gains, effectively silencing our communities, we must advocate for the simple, accurate reporting of data. To do anything less will undermine public confidence in the objectivity of the Census' data collection methods and will reveal an obvious anti-LGBT political agenda that once again trumps science and fairness.

Jaime Grant, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, holds a Ph. D. in women's studies from the Union Institute.