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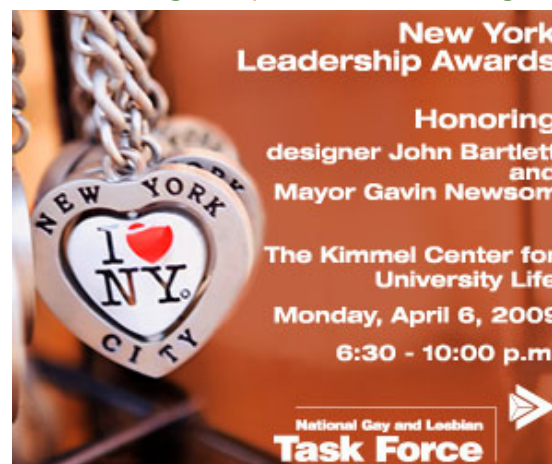


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Our families count
Filed by: **Guest Blogger**
March 30, 2009 3:30 PM



Editors' Note: Guest blogger Jaime Grant is the director of the Policy Institute at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. She holds a Ph.D. in Women's Studies from the Union Institute and has offered a course in social movements at Georgetown University and workshops on gender expression and sexuality at the Task Force's National Conference on LGBT Equality: Creating Change.



As the 2010 census draws near, the concern of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community is growing to a fever pitch. The current push -- to compel the Obama administration to reverse a Bush-era directive that precludes counting same-sex marriages as they are legally and properly reported -- is one that our new president could end with the mere stroke of a pen.

Today, the basic function of the census is widely known: it creates an essential portrait of our nation, every 10 years. This data is used to determine the appropriate number of seats in the House of Representatives. It provides key population numbers for Congress and the administration to determine how federal dollars flow to the states.

There is not now, nor has there ever been, a way for LGBT people to check off a box that identifies us as such -- and thus identifies the challenges, needs and strengths particular to our communities. Such an innovation requires time, expertise and money. Academic researchers must propose questions that work in the context of huge random samples to a general population and Congress must approve the funding that would expand census recording, analysis and reporting on new data. None of these things were remotely possible under the Bush administration.



However, in 1990, the census unintentionally created the opportunity for same-sex couples to be visible when it added an "unmarried partner" box on its list of family configurations. For the first time in U.S. history, same-sex couples living together could check the appropriate gender box alongside the unmarried partner box and create a record of our relationships. Since 1990, data on same-sex "unmarried partners" has been instrumental to countering myths and lies about LGBT communities. For instance, the 2000 census showed that same-sex couples live in nearly every county in the nation, and that black and Latino same-sex couples are raising children at nearly the rates of their heterosexual peers, while earning lower incomes.

As we turn our attention to the 2010 census, we find ourselves in a very different world. Along with those who are "unmarried partners," some of us are now legally married. The Bush administration made it clear that his Census Bureau would take our legal, accurate and honest responses about our marriages, erase them and recode all same-sex couples as unmarried partners. He used the federal Defense of Marriage Act to justify this course of action, despite there being nothing in the law that speaks to the census, or its mandate to perform an accurate, politically neutral headcount of all of the nation's inhabitants.

In late February, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force brought together more than 20 LGBT community leaders to meet with top U.S. Census Bureau officials to discuss LGBT participation in the census. They want us to sign on as a community. As we sat with bureau staff, advocates respectfully but forcefully laid out the faulty ethics of the current position. We noted that there is a fundamental contradiction to require us to fill out our census forms accurately -- or face federal fines -- and then turn around and recode our responses to an erroneous category.

Those of us who have been working for years to add questions about sexual orientation and gender identity to major federal health surveys have been ignored and rebuked. We're told that the "expense" is too great for the government to undertake; data collection on our community represents an "unnecessary expenditure" of scarce resources.

That the census plans to actually spend time and money to effectively annul our marriages is an outrage. And, it is offensive.

The Obama administration has been accessible and inviting to LGBT leaders since the early days of its transition period. LGBT people and our families

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have suffered enough in the wake of an election night that heralded great possibility for the nation, while denying the humanity of our partnerships, marriages and parenting rights in four states. Counting same-sex married couples in the census is only the first step toward correcting a shameful legacy of discrimination in federal data collection on the realities of our lives.

We have high hopes that this president will allow the U.S. Census Bureau to fulfill its mission and not place census takers in the position of undercutting the integrity of their own data. Our community has always been one to stand up and be honest about who we are. Let's hope the U.S. government will respect our honesty and match it with maintaining the integrity of our data. We have worked hard for the right to check the "married" box. Now all they have to do is count us.

Stand up and be counted -- sign the Task Force's petition to the Census Bureau.

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And, a "Transgender" box as well. This is important because it affects our health issues, married or not. Birth Gender: "Male, Female." Current Gender: "Male, Female, Other." We want to be counted, too.

MonicaHelms | March 30, 2009 4:13 PM NEW!
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Jamie Grant makes a compelling case. The U.S. Census does indeed provide the official portrait of the U.S. population. But, like the cable TV ads say, "wait, there is more." Census data is used by all kinds of demographic researchers who, through data programs available through the Census Bureau, do very important customized research. This capability extends numbers analysis well beyond the important goal of counting us by providing analysis of where we live, how old we are, how much money we have to name just a few important data elements. As co-chair of an advocacy group for services to LGBT seniors, I can tell you that one of the first questions we hear is "how many are there and where do they live."

There is another reason for supporting this effort in a very visible manner. The data collection document can only be so long and there is fierce competition from all kinds of advocacy groups for inclusion or expansion. The bureau does look at who weighs in and how much noise they can generate as they make decisions on the substance of the instrument.

Don't think this one is just for policy wonks. Being counted is important.

Alan M. Dinsmore | March 30, 2009 5:16 PM NEW!
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There are also problems with the Census in that if a non-bio mom is filling out the form, she often has no way of indicating her child's relationship to her, especially if they live in a state that does not allow her to adopt, or she has not yet done so, for any number of reasons.

If she has adopted, she could check "Adopted child," although if the child is her partner's biological child and they planned the child together, that's rather insulting--not to mention it could skew demographic studies of how many children there are in need of adoption because they don't have any parents.

Otherwise, she could check "Other relative," which doesn't seem accurate from a legal sense, and also leads to fuzzy demographics when looking at family relationships.

More on all this in [my post on the subject.](#)

Dana Rudolph | March 30, 2009 8:04 PM NEW!
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I agree with Monica. There is more than just a need to be more encompassing about gender, it is imperative to get away from the binary way of thinking about gender and break away from the Euro-American belief that there is only two genders. We need an "other" category added to the gender choices and we need it now. I add that this would not only aid the Transgender community but the entire GLBTIQ Community in general.

The more that we can distance ourselves from the traditional conventions of sex and gender, the easier it is for us to be able to advance politically with that recognition. Whereas it would be useful to know that GLB might be 10% of the population, would it not be even better if TIQ could also add an additional 2 to 4 percentage points to that total when arguing cause and effect in our lives? If people are going to discriminate against all of the GLBTIQ Community for the same reasons, should we not also be counted together?

Angela Brightfeather | March 30, 2009 9:19 PM NEW!
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That's a good argument. I wish people would move away from being emotionally attached to the census and start thinking about it's actual ramifications. I think there's an argument to following LGBT people in there that even the fundies can see.



Alex Blaze | March 31, 2009 10:12 AM NEW!
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