

Opinion: Census count of same-sex couples not enough

By Akiesha Anderson, *The Conversation*

Although LGBT people are becoming more visible in society, federal data reveal little about the U.S. LGBT population and its needs.

In a first in U.S. history, the U.S. Census Bureau will explicitly count same-sex couples living together in the 2020 census.

The decision to ask about same-sex relationships, announced this spring, is an important change that will improve the quality of the data.

Yet the 2020 census and most federal surveys don't ask people to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. That means there's no official count of LGBT people in the country, and most government data sets cannot be used to assess the LGBT population at the national, state or local level. Such information would help policymakers, researchers and advocates understand the particular needs of this population and design effective policies and programs.

As a legal scholar who studies federal sexual orientation and gender identity data, I know that currently there are many unanswered questions about LGBT people's employment, housing and family circumstances; their health and well-being; and the discrimination and disparities they face.

If the census and other federal surveys included sexual orientation and gender identity, we would know so much more.

What the 2020 census will capture

The decennial census is one of the nation's most important

data collections. It's the constitutionally mandated official headcount of people living in the U.S. and is the principal way to determine political representation throughout the nation.

Although the census is collected only every 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau regularly conducts numerous other surveys, including the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey. The data from these and other federal surveys are often used in conjunction with decennial census data to influence law and policy. These data also determine the annual distribution of more than \$675 billion of federal funding.

In the past, demographers analyzing U.S. Census Bureau data had to use complicated and imperfect systems to estimate the number of cohabiting same-sex couples living in the U.S. The current estimate is that there are 646,500 same-sex couples living together in the U.S.

The 2020 census will allow respondents to describe their relationship to members of their household using the categories "same-sex husband/wife/spouse" and "same-sex unmarried partner." In the past, this was not the case.

The 2020 census will better count the number of married and unmarried same-sex couples living together. Respondents' answers will provide a wealth of information about same-sex couples' diversity, their children and living arrangements, employment rates and incomes.

Gaps in the data

By capturing distinct data only on same-sex couples living together, however, the 2020 census will tell us nothing about the entire LGBT population, including LGBT people who are single or bisexuals in different-sex relationships. Nor will it capture specific data on transgender youth and adults.

During the Obama administration, the Department of Justice and other federal agencies asked the U.S. Census Bureau to collect sexual orientation and gender identity information. However, the Trump administration withdrew these requests, against the objection of members of the U.S. Senate, LGBT rights groups, researchers and others.

The U.S. Census Bureau's director stated in a blog post that "there's no federal data need" nor any statutory requirement to collect sexual orientation and gender identity data.

It's true that Congress has failed to pass legislation that would require the census to add sexual orientation and gender identity questions. However, as the U.S. Census Bureau has acknowledged, various questions are included on the decennial census or other surveys because "the data are needed for program planning, implementation or evaluation" even though "there is no explicit mandate or requirement." Moreover, the Department of Justice and other agencies' requests to the U.S. Census Bureau clearly articulated the federal need for this data.

Only a few federal surveys currently capture information about sexual orientation and gender identity. That suggests that such items could easily be added to the census and other federal surveys that ask about people's demographics.

Beyond the decennial census, the Trump administration has rolled back sexual orientation and gender identity data collection in other federal surveys.

Why it matters

Businesses, government agencies, journalists, researchers and others use U.S. Census Bureau data to understand the socioeconomic characteristics of the nation. Without an accurate count, many public and private programs and services may not effectively reach vulnerable LGBT populations.

Moreover, there are federal laws and programs in place designed to increase access to employment, housing, health care and other services. But without inclusive data, policymakers, social service providers and others can't know if these activities meet the needs of LGBT people and help them thrive. Without this information, stereotypes and myths may drive policies that impact LGBT people.

For example, despite the popular stereotype of LGBT affluence, studies suggest that some LGBT people are more likely than their non-LGBT counterparts to be in poverty. Also, despite the belief that marriage equality would result in full societal acceptance, many LGBT people throughout the nation continue to face persistent and pervasive discrimination.

What's more, the LGBT population faces numerous health disparities compared to the non-LGBT population, such as higher rates of substance use, depressive symptoms and suicide attempts.

Existing data show that the LGBT population is remarkably diverse and that the experiences of LGBT people are shaped by many factors, including race, age, socioeconomic status and education level. But existing data are not enough. The U.S. Census Bureau's failure to ask sexual orientation and gender identity questions makes it hard to know much about the intersections between LGBT status and other characteristics.

In my view, if policymakers want to truly understand and attempt to meet the diverse needs of LGBT people, then more inclusive data ought to be collected. And the U.S. Census Bureau – with its vast surveys, strict confidentiality and expertise – is the ideal agency to lead the way.

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