

# iMAPP Policy Brief

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## SAME-SEX UNIONS AND DIVORCE RISK: DATA FROM SWEDEN

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### Summary

*A recent study offers the first systematic review of same-sex unions and divorce rates based on accurate national register data in Sweden from the 1990's.<sup>1</sup>*

*The study found that gay male couples were 1.5 times as likely (or 50 percent more likely) to divorce as married opposite-sex couples, while lesbian couples were 2.67 times as likely (167 percent more likely) to divorce as opposite-sex married couples over a similar period of time.<sup>2</sup> Even after controlling for demographic characteristics associated with increased risk of divorce, male same-sex couples were 1.35 times as likely (35 percent more likely) to divorce, and lesbian couples were three times as likely (200 percent more likely) to divorce as opposite-sex married couples.*

### Background

Although there is a growing literature on same-sex couples, “large scale quantitative studies are rare. Many studies face serious problems related to sampling or representativity.”<sup>3</sup> Taking advantage of Swedish population-register systems that now include same-gender couples, researchers reviewed data from all registered same-sex partnerships, “a civil status that in practice is not much short of a marriage,”<sup>4</sup> and compared them to data on Swedish marriages contracted over a similar time period.

While still a “work in progress,” the paper nonetheless represents one of the first

studies of an “unambiguously defined population of gay and lesbian couples” based on accurate, national data.<sup>5</sup>

### Demand for SSM

According to the researchers, “the incidence of same-sex marriage in Norway and Sweden is not particularly impressive in terms of numbers.”<sup>6</sup> In Sweden, 1,526 same-sex partnerships were contracted between 1995 and 2002, compared with 280,000 Swedish opposite-sex marriages over the same period. Thus, 5 out of 1000 new partnerships in Sweden were same-gender couples, a ratio that is “considerably lower than the various estimates of fractions [of the population that are] . . . homosexuals.”<sup>7</sup>

### Characteristics of Unions

In Sweden, 62 percent of same-sex couples in legal unions were male.<sup>8</sup> Same-sex unions differed from opposite-sex married couples in several ways: they were older, better educated, more likely to live in the national capitol, and less likely to have children than opposite-sex marriages.

**Age.** Same-sex couples in legal unions were much older, on average, than married couples. The age gap between partners was larger, on average, in same-sex unions than in opposite-sex married couples. In Sweden, 50 percent of gay couples (and 29 percent of lesbian partners) had a mean age of 41 years or older at time of registration, compared to 14 percent of opposite-sex marriages.<sup>9</sup> More than half of all male partners (and 37 percent of all lesbian partners) had an age difference

between partners of at least six years, compared to 23 percent of Swedish marriages contracted over the time period.<sup>10</sup> In more than one out of three gay male couples, one partner was at least ten years older than the other (compared to about one out of 7 lesbian couples and one out of 10 of opposite-sex marriages).<sup>11</sup>

**Education.** Same-sex couples were better educated, on average, than opposite-sex married couples. In 56 percent of male partnerships (and 57 percent of lesbian couples), at least one partner had post-secondary education, compared to 44 percent of married couples.<sup>12</sup> In 32 percent of lesbian couples, both partners had advanced education, compared to 20 percent of male couples and 17 percent of opposite sex marriages.<sup>13</sup>

**Family Structure.** Same-sex unions were less likely to include children. In 19 percent of gay male partnerships, at least one partner already had a biological child at the time of registration, compared to 34 percent of lesbian couples and 58 percent of opposite-sex marriages.<sup>14</sup> Many, if not most, of these children are likely the product of previous heterosexual unions. In 20 percent of gay male unions, at least one partner had previously married a member of the opposite sex, compared to 27 percent of lesbians and 27 percent of opposite-sex marriages.<sup>15</sup>

### **Divorce Risks**

In general, characteristics associated with increased risk of divorce appear very similar for same-sex and opposite-sex partners:<sup>16</sup> Younger couples, less educated couples, couples with greater age differences, couples where one partner was foreign-born, or where one or both partners had been previously married, were more likely to divorce. For example, Swedish partners with only a secondary education or less were more than twice as likely to separate as couples where both partners had a university degree.<sup>17</sup>

Same-sex legal unions, however, had unusually high rates of divorce. Sweden is a country with relatively low rates of marriage and relatively high rates of divorce. In 1999, 55 percent of Swedish births were outside of marriage.<sup>18</sup> There were 53 divorces for every 100 marriages.<sup>19</sup> Overall, gay male couples were 1.5 times as likely (50 percent more likely) to divorce within the 8-year study period and lesbian couples in legal unions were 2.67 times as likely (167 percent more likely) to divorce.<sup>20</sup> After controlling for demographic variables associated with increased divorce risk, gay partners remained 1.35 times as likely (35 percent more likely) to divorce and lesbian partners three times as likely (200 percent more likely) to divorce as opposite-sex married couples.<sup>21</sup>

The lower rates of children among same-sex couples did not explain this difference. Even among childless households, same-sex male partnerships experienced almost a 50 percent higher likelihood (1.49 times as likely) of divorce during the study period, while childless lesbian couples were three times as likely (200 percent higher likelihood) to break up as a married couple without children.

One reason children may not reduce the divorce risk on same-sex couples is that these children are less likely to be children of both partners and more often “stepchildren” for one partner. The authors speculate that there may be an indirect effect from the possibility of procreation in reducing divorce risk in opposite-sex marriages: “To some extent, the disruption risks of childless heterosexual spouses might be reduced in anticipation of childrearing, i.e., when spouses stay together in order to fulfill their plans of parenthood.”<sup>22</sup>

More research is needed to determine why same-sex legal unions in Sweden are significantly more likely to divorce.

<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Andersson, et al., 2004. “Divorce-Risk Patterns in Same-Sex ‘Marriages’ in Norway and Sweden,” paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America (April 3), available at <http://paa2004.princeton.edu/download.asp?submissionId=40208>. The paper also looks at characteristics of legal same-sex unions in Norway, but does not compare the divorce risks for these couples with Norwegian opposite-sex marriages.

<sup>2</sup> The registered partnership data was collected 1995 to 2002, while the marriage statistics are based on data from 1993 through 1999. *See id.* at 24, Table 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 4. Thus, note the authors, although “Kurdeck (1992, 1995) provides a study on the stability of gay and lesbian couples in the U.S., . . . it is based on such tiny data that it hardly offers any possibility to make generalizations to a wider population of gays and lesbians.” *Id.* at 7, n.4.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 2. Whether registered partnerships are considered marriages by Scandinavian culture in general is not clear. The authors also note “the legal rights and duties to marriage are less critical in Scandinavia than in other countries.” *Id.* at 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 1, 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 24, Table 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 26, Table 3. Because of the smaller sample size only age, education, and duration of partnership was significant at the 5 percent level for same-sex partners. *Id.* at 15, n.11.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 26, Table 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Sardon, 2000. “The Demographic Situation of Europe and the Developed Countries Overseas,” *Population: An English Selection*, 12: 293-328 (Table 4a).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 316, Table 5.

<sup>20</sup> Andersson et al., at 28, Table 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 17.