

The demography of Australia’s same-sex marriage ‘pioneers’: results from the first year of marriage equality

Fiona Shalley, Charles Darwin University

Tom Wilson, The University of Melbourne

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Same-sex marriage is surely the most significant socio-demographic phenomenon of the early 21st century. On 9 December 2017 Australia became the 27th country in the world to legalise marriage between same-sex couples after the Netherlands was the first to adopt marriage equality legislation in 2000. Recognition of same-sex marriage affords identical social, legal and economic rights to gay and lesbian married couples that opposite-sex married couples have long enjoyed. Significantly, the growing recognition of same-sex marriage internationally challenges long held conceptions of family and poses demographic questions about how the new family diversity impacts fertility, mobility and socio-economic wellbeing. Although now protected in legislation, this new ‘family’ may still attract levels of discrimination and prejudice.

Understanding the demographic profile of Australia’s non-heterosexual community remains obscured in its nationally represented data. Wilson and Shalley (2018) published the first estimates of Australia’s adult non-heterosexual population (aged 18 years and over) by sex and broad age group, and for each of the eight Australian jurisdictions (State/Territory). These estimates suggested a population of around 600,000 or approximately 3.2% of the total population. They also estimated a larger female non-heterosexual population than male (3.4% and 3.1% respectively). The potential for improved understanding of the size, shape and spread of the lesbian and gay population from a register of same-sex marriages has implications for demographic accuracy and validity.

This study takes advantage of new Australian data that enables a national picture of the gay and lesbian population. These data were sourced from each of the eight jurisdictional Registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages. The research answered the following questions:

- a) How many same-sex marriages were registered? – by sex of marriage and comparisons made with opposite sex couples
- b) Who got married? – a demographic profile of same-sex marriage partners
- c) Where do married same-sex couples live? – a spatial distribution below State/Territory level

2. Data and methods

De-identified unit record data on all marriages registered in the 2018 calendar year were separately provided by each State/Territory Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. The details of each marriage generally included: jurisdiction of marriage (the state/territory where the marriage was solemnised); sex of each partner (male, female or X which refers to indeterminate/intersex/unspecified); age of each partner (calculated at time of marriage from date of birth); prior conjugal status of each partner (not previously married, divorced, widowed); country of birth of each partner (sometimes provided as place of birth); occupation of each partner (open field text); usual residential address of each partner (in most cases postcode); number of children from past marriages (where applicable and if entered into the Registry system).

Marriage type was derived from the sex of each partner. This identified same-sex and opposite sex marriages, and within same-sex marriage the sex of the marriage. Crude marriage rates were calculated using the non-heterosexual population estimates published by Wilson and Shalley (2018), disaggregated by state/territory and sex. ArcGIS was used to map the size, proportion and rates of same-sex marriages across Australia.

3. Preliminary results

116,801 marriages were registered in Australia in the first year of the changed marriage legislation. 6,672 of these were same-sex marriages, or 5.7% of all marriages. The largest number of same-sex marriages was between female partners (3,859 or 57.8%) followed by marriages between male partners (2,798 or 41.9%). A small number of marriages were between partners where both identified a non-specific gender (17) and these have been included in the count of same-sex marriages but not further disaggregated.

A summary of socio-demographic characteristics across the three marriage types are shown in Table 1. Clear differences in the age structure of same-sex marriages were evident with higher proportions of older gay marriages. Lesbian married partners were also more likely to be older. More than half of all gay marriages had a least one partner born overseas (56%) while sixty percent of lesbian marriages had both partners born in Australia. This is of interest in terms of the history of legislative acknowledgement of same-sex partnerships in Australia and where Australia is geographically situated relative to the acceptance of homosexuality and marriage equality within the broader region. Nearly one third of all lesbian marriages (32%) involved at least one of the partners being previously married, higher than opposite-sex marriages (28%) and gay marriages (18%). These marriage data also confirmed significant proportions of children conceived in previous heterosexual marriages, showing 18% of lesbian marriages and 9% of gay marriages bringing children from a previous marriage.

Table 1: Characteristics of marriages solemnised in 2018, by marriage type

Variable	Male-Male Marriages	Female-Female Marriages	Male-Female Marriages
Mean Age of Couple	(%)	(%)	(%)
< 31 years	13.6	22.3	48.8
31-40 years	25.1	30.2	32.7
41 plus years	61.4	47.5	18.4
Median age of partners	45 years	39 years	31 years
Country of Birth*	(%)	(%)	(%)
Both Australia	44.1	60.3	53.7
One Australia	36.1	22.0	24.0
Both overseas	19.8	17.1	22.3
Previously married	(%)	(%)	(%)
At least one of the partners divorced	18.2	32.0	27.5
At least one of the partners widowed	0.6	0.9	1.5
Child/ren from a previous marriage**	(%)	(%)	(%)
At least one of the partners	8.9	17.8	16.0

* Not supplied for WA registered marriages

** Not supplied for WA or Qld registered marriages

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has confirmed a number of international observations relevant to the introduction of same-sex marriage in Australia. The first year saw higher rates of same-sex marriage relative to the international experience and compared with opposite-sex marriage. We also observed an older age profile in the pioneer same-sex couples. The long wait for marriage equality in Australia is likely to have contributed to both results.

The larger numbers and higher rates of lesbian marriages may suggest that women have greater confidence in the institution of marriage providing them legal security and status. This may be more important to them for raising children, particularly when the proportion bringing children from a previous marriage is double that of gay marriages. It could equally be an artefact of the higher estimates of non-heterosexual females in Australia compared to males. The higher likelihood of gay marriages having at least one partner born overseas is interesting in the context of the history of immigration law within Australia. Despite taking a long time to introduce marriage equality, Australia was relatively progressive in acknowledging same-sex relationships, allowing same-sex partners to be sponsored under amendments to the Australian Migration Bill in 1991. Between 1997 and 2004 visas

granted to gay men were more than double those of lesbian women (519 and 236 respectively) (Yue 2008).

Spatially, the distribution of same-sex marriages adds to our understanding of where targeted services should be considered. Although greater Sydney remains a significant part of the gay geography, the Northern Territory appears to have a unique attraction for both gay and lesbian married couples.

Same-sex marriage adds to the diversity of “family” in Australia. The fact that it has been embraced so wholeheartedly by the non-heterosexual population poses questions for demographers, particularly in the areas of fertility – how many are likely to conceive children, mobility – will labour force and fertility decisions influence where couples will settle, and well-being – will there be differential experiences of service discrimination in the future.

References

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