

# LGBTQ FAQ

**By Meghan Maury**

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**Q: Does the 2020 Census collect data about LGBTQ people?**

**A:** The 2020 Census will collect information about same-sex couples who are living in the same household.

For the first time, the “relationship to householder” census question will include the response options “Same-sex husband/wife/spouse” and “Same-sex unmarried partner.” These response options will result in more accurate and easily accessible information about same-sex couples than ever before.

However, the census won’t collect any data about same-sex couples who don’t live together, nor about transgender people, nonbinary people, single LGBTQ people or bisexual people in different-sex couples.

**Q: What will the 2020 Census tell us about the LGBTQ community?**

**A:** Because the census only collects data about same-sex couples and not about the full LGBTQ community, it won’t tell us as much as it could. Data on same-sex couples deduced from earlier decennial censuses did help show racial and ethnic diversity, geographic distribution, total number in a state or region and the percent who have children.

Same-sex couples’ experiences don’t always mirror those of the broader LGBTQ population. For example, the unemployment rates of same-sex and different-sex couples are roughly equivalent. However, data on the whole LGBTQ community’s unemployment rates are higher than for non-LGBTQ people.

Data for subsets reveal even greater disparities: 14.3% of transgender people received unemployment benefits compared to 4.3% of cisgender people and 7.2% of LGBTQ women receive unemployment benefits compared to 4.4% of non-LGBTQ women, [according to the Center for American Progress \(https://tinyurl.com/LGBTQdata\)](https://tinyurl.com/LGBTQdata). Because census data provide information only about a small proportion of the LGBTQ community, the resulting data are limited.

**Q: When did the census first collect data about same-sex couples?**

**A:** In 1990, the Census Bureau added an “unmarried partner” response option for its “relationship to householder” question. At the time, LGBTQ advocates [launched a campaign \(https://tinyurl.com/taskforce1990\)](https://tinyurl.com/taskforce1990) urging people in same-sex couples to check the “unmarried partner” box on the 1990 Census. The campaign’s stated mission was “to increase public awareness of the question and pressure the Census Bureau to be more sensitive to gay and lesbian concerns.”

But rather than publishing data on same-sex couple responses, the Census Bureau decided that those households had responded to the gender question erroneously and re-coded one partner’s gender so the couple showed up in data files as a different-sex couple.

In 2000, the census once again had an “unmarried partner” category as part of its “relationship to householder” question. LGBTQ advocates pressed the Census Bureau to stop re-coding the gender of same-sex partners in public-use data. The Census Bureau agreed. However, it did recode same-sex couples that checked “married partner” to “unmarried partner,” again justifying it as an attempt to remedy errors.

**Q: How do transgender and nonbinary people navigate the “sex” question on the 2020 Census?**

**A:** The “sex” question on the 2020 Census only allows respondents to choose “male” or “female.” For some transgender people and most nonbinary people, this does not give them an

accurate way to portray their gender. And even when it does, the resulting data tells us nothing about whether that person is transgender.

Unfortunately, most nonbinary and transgender people have been forced to navigate a binary sex question on many forms and surveys in their lifetime. LGBTQ activists continue to advocate for better data collection on the transgender and nonbinary community. In the meantime, they work to ensure that transgender and nonbinary people receive accurate information about how census data are used and compiled so they can respond in the way that feels best for them.

Transgender and nonbinary people may benefit from this information:

- **The census encourages self-identification.** For every census question, including the “sex” question and the race and ethnicity questions, the census encourages respondents to respond with answers that feel most accurate to them.
- **The Census Bureau doesn’t compare responses to any other records.** Some transgender and nonbinary people have identification documents -- like driver’s licenses or birth certificates -- that reflect their gender. Others have not updated their identification documents. The Census Bureau respects respondents’ self-identification on the census form and does not compare your census responses to any other document or record.
- **If the “sex” question is left blank, or both responses are checked, the Census Bureau will fill in what it assumes is the “correct” answer.** If a form appears incomplete or inaccurate, the Census Bureau may follow up to get the form completed. But if it cannot get in contact with the respondent, it uses “imputation,” a process that employs statistical modeling to determine the most likely answer to a question.

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