

Same-Sex Parenting and High School Graduation Rates

The “no difference” mantra of mental health associations is failing the test of better research

by Christopher Rosik, Ph.D.

A new study in the *Review of Economics of the Household* (Allen, 2013) is challenging the conventional wisdom of there being “no differences” in the range of outcomes for children who live in a household with same-sex parents compared to children who live with married opposite-sex parents. Whereas the research on same-sex parents to date has overwhelmingly been conducted on small samples of mostly lesbian couples, often by lesbian-identified researchers, Allen’s study employs a truly impressive 20% random sample of the 2006 Canadian census. At the time of this census, Canada’s same-sex couples had enjoyed all taxation and government benefits since 1997 and legal same-sex marriage since 2005.

Such a large and random sample that is able to distinguish same-sex couples is critical for a number of reasons. Allen observes that the literature on child development in same-sex households is lacking on several grounds:

First, the research is characterized by levels of advocacy, policy endorsement, and awareness of political consequences that is disproportionate with the strength and substance of the preliminary empirical findings. Second, the literature generally utilizes measures of child and family performance that are not easily verifiable by third party replication, which vary from one study to another in ways that make comparisons difficult, and which differ substantially from measures standardly used in other family studies. But most important, almost all of the literature on same-sex parenting (which almost always means lesbian parenting) is based on some combination of weak empirical designs, small biased convenience samples, “snowballing,” and low powered tests.

“Power” in this context is a statistical term for the ability of a test to identify actual differences. With small sample sizes, only the largest of differences can be detected and there is a very real risk that many significant differences will be missed. This creates a serious bias in the direction of the “no differences” conclusion. Allen’s review of 53 studies on same-sex parenting found almost all to be non-random designs and only two had sample sizes larger than 500. Many of these studies had samples sizes between 30-60. To place this issue in proper context, Allen noted that to properly test any hypothesis regarding gay parenting, a sample size of at least 800 is necessary. The author concludes, “A review of the same-sex parenting literature inevitably leads to the conclusion that it is a collection of exploratory studies.”

Allen’s use of the Canada census data allowed him to examine and control for many variables whose influences heretofore could not be clearly discerned. These include controls for parental marital status, family mobility (i.e., recent change in residence), child school attendance, and parental education. The study was also able to distinguish between gay and lesbian families and evaluate differences in gender between parents and children. This high level of analytical resolution constitutes a large step forward in the advancement of the same-sex parenting literature.

Overall, Allen emphasized three primary features of his sample: children of married opposite-sex families have a high graduation rate compared to the others; children of lesbian families have a very low graduation rate compared to the others; and the other four types (common law heterosexual couple, single mother, single father, and gay male couple) are similar to each other and lie in between the married opposite-sex household and lesbian household extremes. Allen summarizes his findings on the effect of parent and child genders in same-sex households as follows:

...the results on high school graduation rates suggest that children living in both gay and lesbian households struggle compared to children from opposite sex married households. In general, it appears that these children are only about 65% as likely to graduate from high school compared to the [married opposite-sex] control group—a difference that holds whether conditioned on controls or not. When the households are broken down by child gender it appears that daughters are struggling more than sons, and that daughters of gay [male] parents have strikingly low graduation rates.

The latter conclusions are worthy of greater clarity, because they are the first findings that can really address the effects of fatherlessness or motherlessness on boys and girls in same-sex households. These data indicate that the specific gender mix of a same-sex household makes a “dramatic difference” in the association with child graduation. Girls in lesbian households were only 45% as likely to graduate compared to girls from homes with both a mother and a father. More strikingly, girls from gay male households were only 15% as likely to graduate as girls from an opposite-sex household. A parallel comparison for boys in lesbian households found them to be 76% as likely to graduate as their male peers in opposite-sex households. Finally, boys in gay male households were found to be 61% more likely to graduate than boys in opposite-sex households. However, Allen added that the results for boys, unlike those for girls, were not statistically significant.

Looking at these differences from another angle, Allen's findings indicated that in gay male households, sons achieved a 72% graduation rate and daughters achieved a 43% graduation rate. For lesbian households, the graduate rates were 48% for boys and 55% for girls. Allen notes that such differences seem inconsistent with blanket claims of discrimination as an explanation for these findings, which he summarizes as indicating "sons do better with fathers, and daughters do better with mothers."

For all the advances this study represents in the gay parenting literature, its methodological limitations included an inability to (1) track the household history of children, (2) establish the birth circumstances of the children studied (i.e., whether the child came to the couple via adoption, surrogacy, or prior heterosexual union), (3) identify children living with a gay or lesbian single parent, and (4) separate married from common law gay and lesbian couples. Future studies would ideally also assess for experiences of harassment at school to determine the extent to which such experiences could influence the graduation rates among the children of same-sex parents. As Allen observes, the proper path forward in this literature is to do further research to understand the differences he has observed, not to continue the increasingly tenuous assertion of "no differences" in outcomes between children raised by same-sex or opposite-sex parents.

A final observation: it is worth noting that this important study was conducted by an economist and published within an economics-related journal. While this might seem somewhat odd, it may reflect the fact that there is currently far more ideological and political diversity in the field of economics than there is in any of the social sciences. Thus, one is likely to find much more viewpoint diversity and a concomitant greater ability to conduct and publish research among economists on subjects that may work against the advocacy interests of liberal social causes. The harassment, character assassination, misconduct investigations, and professional marginalization endured by Regnerus over his recent study of same-sex parenting may be less likely to occur among economists than mental health professionals (Woods, 2013). In fact, it is conceivable that economists will end up doing the work that social scientists in the mental health disciplines have neglected, at least until research such as Allen's is sufficiently replicated and it becomes increasingly untenable for the mental health professionals to maintain the "no differences" mantra.

References

Allen, D. W. (2013). High school graduation rates among children of same-sex households. *Review of Economics of the Household*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.007/s11150-013-9220-y

Wood, P. (2013). The campaign to discredit Regnerus and the assault on peer review. *Academic Questions*, 26, 171-181. doi: 10.1077/s12129-013-9364-5