



Fiona SHALLEY* and Tom WILSON**

The Demography of Australia's Same-Sex Marriage 'Pioneers': Results from the First Year of Marriage Equality

The introduction in 2000 of same-sex marriage rights in the Netherlands initiated a slow but irreversible movement. Since then, 31 countries on all continents have passed such legislation. Australia did so in 2017. Administrative statistics make it possible to count these same-sex couples and describe their partners' characteristics. Following the French case (Population, no. 4, 2019), the Australian experience provides us with original demographic knowledge on these new married couples, as yet little studied statistically.

Same-sex marriage is one of the most significant sociodemographic phenomena of the early 21st century (Chamie and Mirkin, 2011; Pennay *et al.*, 2018). Recognition of same-sex marriage affords identical social, legal, and economic rights to married gay and lesbian couples that different-sex married couples have long enjoyed.⁽¹⁾ Its origins can be traced to the introduction of civil partnerships in the late 20th century, beginning with Denmark in 1989 and shortly afterwards in several other mostly European countries. These partnerships provided many, but not all, of the rights of marriage. Same-sex marriage itself was first legalized by the Netherlands in 2001, followed by Belgium in 2003 and Spain in 2005 (Chamie and Mirkin, 2011). Figure 1 presents the timeline of marriage equality across the world, showing an increasing number of countries adopting same-sex marriage legislation from 2010. Australia became the 27th country in 2017, following a national plebiscite in favour of same-sex marriage. The Australian parliament voted to amend the *Marriage*

(1) The terms *gay* and *lesbian* are frequently used to refer to same-sex marriages, which we also do here, although it is acknowledged that these terms refer to sexual orientation and may differ from the type of union (e.g. a person in a same-sex or different-sex union may consider themselves bisexual, not gay, lesbian, or heterosexual).

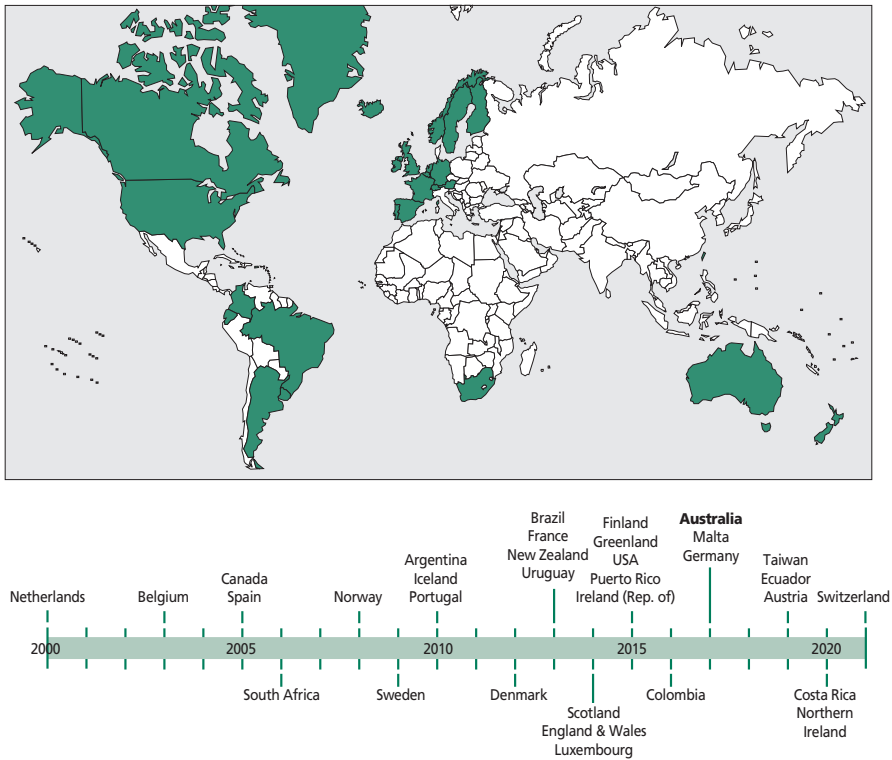
* Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University. ORCID 0000-0001-5101-9949

** Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne. ORCID 0000-0001-8812-7556

Correspondence: Fiona Shalley, Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, Ellengowan Drive, Darwin, NT 0909, Australia. Email: fiona.shalley@edu.edu.au

Act 1961, and the law allowing same-sex couples to marry in Australia came into effect on 9 December 2017. The *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* changed the definition of marriage to ‘the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others’ (Section 51). It also recognized valid same-sex marriages performed under the law of a foreign country at the time they were solemnized.

Figure 1. Recognition of same-sex marriage around the world as of November 2021



Note: Switzerland passed same-sex marriage legislation in September 2021. It comes into force in July 2022.

Source: Authors’ construction based on Pew Research Center map (Masci and DeSilver, 2019) and updated to November 2021.

This study takes advantage of newly available Australian marriage data that further our understanding of same-sex partnerships and the demography of sexual minorities more generally. Using unique administrative data supplied to us by each of the eight state and territory registries of births, deaths, and marriages (RBDM), we describe the demographic characteristics of those couples who married in the first year of marriage equality. We explore differences in the rate of male and female same-sex marriage, the proportion of couples who brought children from a previous marriage(s), and the location of same-sex married

couples across the country. We also attempt to compare the experience of same-sex marriage in Australia with that of other countries.

Understanding same-sex partnerships and the family lives of sexual minorities is still an emerging research area in Australia, although a recent review of literature by Perales *et al.* (2019) found that more research has been undertaken since the beginning of the century. Researchers have explored the demography and geography of same-sex couples and their families using data from the Australian census (e.g. Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2010; Dempsey, 2013; Forrest *et al.*, 2019). Although the census does not ask about sexual identity, the number of same-sex cohabiting couples can be derived from answers to questions on a person's sex and their relationship to others in the household. International trends suggest people are increasingly comfortable in declaring their sexual minority status in some population datasets, with recent surveys showing younger people are more likely to identify (Gates, 2014; Wilson and Shalley, 2018; Office of National Statistics, 2020). Data also show that men are more likely than women to identify as homosexual, while women increasingly identify as bisexual (Bailey *et al.*, 2016). The prevalence of sexual minorities, however, varies widely across countries, and studies have documented the challenges associated with comparability and estimation methods, including the impact of survey mode (Aspinal, 2009), the question(s) asked and categories of sexual minority responses offered (Wilson *et al.*, 2020b), and the ways population registers identify sexual orientation for single people and for those in informal same-sex relationships (Cortina and Festy, 2014). Cultural perceptions of sexual minorities and differential social acceptance of sexual minorities, as well as the continuing risk and stigma of self-identification also impact efforts to understand differences in prevalence rates by country (Baunach, 2012; Valfort, 2017; Perales and Campbell, 2018). The most recent estimates of the sexual minority population in Australia revealed a population size of 650,000 or 3.5% of the total adult Australian population in 2016, comparable with estimates in the United States (4.5%), New Zealand (3.5%), and the United Kingdom (2.9%) (Wilson *et al.*, 2020b).

Opportunities to identify as a member of a gay or lesbian couple or household also affect accurate estimation of the numbers of same-sex couple relationships, households, and children raised within them (Cortina and Festy, 2014). This becomes relevant to research on negative public objections to same-sex marriage centred on the parenting of children (see discussion in Gates, 2015) because evidence of the relative stability of same-sex relationships and the socio-economic well-being and contentment of partners and children raised in these partnerships has generally been based on qualitative studies. These studies have been criticized because of small and often homogenous samples. However, a meta-analysis conducted by Cowl *et al.* (2008) and updated by Dempsey (2013) found no evidence of child psychological maladjustment or lower quality parent-child relationships for children raised in same-sex

families, although most of the literature was based on research conducted in the United States. In another review of research evidence, Gates (2015) concluded that ‘As society has begun to treat same-sex couples more like different-sex couples, the differences between the two have narrowed’ (p. 69), which may alleviate any related stress, social stigma, and their associated impacts on the children in same-sex families.

Given how recently same-sex marriage was introduced, little is known about its demography and geography in Australia. Only summary statistics on same-sex marriage published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2019) were available at the time of writing. Even for countries where same-sex marriage was introduced years ago, few studies of trends and patterns exist. A comprehensive review of the Swedish experience of same-sex unions, marriage, and divorce from 1995 to 2012 by Kolk and Andersson (2020) found male same-sex unions were initially more common, but the number of female same-sex unions increased more rapidly later in the period. This increase was linked to legal changes in parental rights rather than the introduction in 2009 of same-sex marriage itself. Steenhof and Harmsen (2004) estimated the number of same-sex couples forming a household in the Netherlands using register data. Even though same-sex marriages and registered partnerships were visible in the data, informal consensual unions were not. Ross et al. (2011) studied 5 years of same-sex civil partnerships in England and Wales before same-sex marriage was legalized. Numbers peaked immediately after the legislation was enacted, and initially higher proportions of male same-sex partnerships were formed. The authors also observed the average age at civil partnership formation had decreased over time but had remained higher than that of different-sex couples who married during the same period. Meslay (2019) investigated the first 5 years of same-sex marriage in France and raised questions about differences between male and female same-sex couples in the motivation to marry as opposed to forming another type of partnership.

I. The road to marriage equality

1. What shaped the Australian experience?

Laws in Australia are made by the Commonwealth (Federal Government) and the eight separate states and territories, and those pertaining to rights for sexual minorities have not been uniformly applied; inconsistencies were often based on where people lived. South Australia was the first of the eight jurisdictions to legalize sex between men (but not women) in 1975, but it took nearly 20 years before Commonwealth legislation decriminalized sexual activity between any consenting adults (1994). Previously, the *Migration Amendment Act (no. 2) 1991 (Cth)* was passed allowing Australian citizens and permanent

residents to sponsor their same-sex partners to Australia.⁽²⁾ Gains in legislative acceptance of same-sex relationships however suffered in 2004, when same-sex marriage was prohibited by amendments to the *Marriage Act 1961 (Marriage Amendment Act 2004, Subsection 5(1))*. Progress resumed when wide-ranging reforms were enacted to prevent discrimination of same-sex couples and their families in the provision of most government services and benefits—the *Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Act 2008* and the *Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—Superannuation) Act 2008*. Adoption law and access to reproductive services, however, remained outside the scope of these reforms (Sifris, 2010), and equal rights have been slowly updated in the decade since. For example, while altruistic surrogacy for same-sex couples remains illegal in Western Australia and no legislation supports surrogacy in the Northern Territory, altruistic surrogacy has been legalized in all other jurisdictions.

Although same-sex couples were excluded from marriage, all states and territories—except Western Australia and the Northern Territory—began granting partnership recognition arrangements from 2004.⁽³⁾ ABS data (2018) show that the number of registered relationships grew significantly over the 5-year period from 2013 to 2017 (from 7,281 to 14,626), however public data provides no breakdown by the sex composition of the couple. Before the passing of Commonwealth marriage equality legislation, six Australian jurisdictions automatically recognized same-sex marriages already solemnized in countries with marriage equality as civil partnerships in state law. Australia has been the only country, apart from the Republic of Ireland, to legalize same-sex marriage through a national vote (Wilson *et al.*, 2020a). Although many of the associated voting campaigns devalued same-sex relationships and reinforced their social stigma and political inequality (Ecker *et al.*, 2019), there was a majority 'yes' response in favour of same-sex marriage in 133 of the country's 150 electoral divisions. Only three of the majority 'no'-voting electorates were in regional or rural areas (Wilson *et al.*, 2020a). Responding to this decisive result, the Australian government legalized same-sex marriage as of 9 December 2017.

As society slowly recognized and granted rights to same-sex unions, marriage as an institution underwent significant change. With the social acceptance of families forming outside marriage, couples in Australia have delayed their decision to marry, and increasing numbers of marriages are preceded by cohabitation (e.g. ABS, 2018). Crude marriage rates have declined since the 1940s to 4.8 per 1,000 people in 2018 (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019),

(2) Under Australian immigration law, an Australian citizen, permanent resident, or eligible New Zealand citizen usually resident in Australia must sponsor their non-Australian fiancé or partner to enable immigration to Australia.

(3) These arrangements exist as registered relationships and are termed *domestic relationships* in Victoria and South Australia, *civil partnerships* in the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland, and *registered relationships* in New South Wales.

and similar trends have been observed internationally (Prioux, 2005; Cohen, 2013; Bellamy, 2015). Coontz (2004) argued that the institution of marriage has evolved from a social and economic transaction to one emphasizing companionship satisfaction, and then to a union between two individuals: 'marriage will never regain its monopoly over the regulation of sex, the rearing of children, the transmission of resources from the older to the younger generation, or the organization of the divisions of labor by gender' (p. 978). The revolution of same-sex marriage sits within this institutional transformation.

2. The international experience

International trends provide further context for the experience of same-sex marriage in Australia. Other Scandinavian countries followed Denmark in legally recognizing same-sex partnerships (Norway in 1993 and Sweden in 1994), and over time civil partnerships have bestowed almost the same rights as marriage, including the right to adopt children (Andersson and Kolk, 2011). In these countries, the maturing of both social and legal protections afforded by civil partnerships may have diluted the social impetus for changes to marriage legislation. Norway only recognized same-sex marriage in 2008, followed by Sweden in 2009 and Denmark in 2010.

Differences in the interplay between registered same-sex unions and the recognition of same-sex marriage continue to complicate any direct international comparison, particularly whether a transfer between a union and a marriage is counted in the marriage statistics. Further complicating direct comparison between countries are issues of within-country lag in the full acceptance of changed marriage legislation, different legal responses such as the introduction of new categories of marriage, and cross-border attraction to countries or states that were early adopters of marriage equality legalization leading to higher numbers. For example, although Canada was the first non-European country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003, associated rights were only gradually introduced and did not extend across the entire country until July 2005. In the United States, same-sex marriage was first introduced in Massachusetts in 2004, expanding to all states 11 years later through a complex process of contested legal cases, ending in a landmark Supreme Court decision. South Africa became the first African country to recognize same-sex marriage but in doing so legislated an additional category of marriage in the *Civil Union Act*. In the Republic of Ireland, same-sex marriage replaced the option of civil partnership when marriage equality was recognized in 2015. For a few years, New Zealand was isolated in the Asia-Pacific region as the only country with marriage equality. It attracted substantial numbers of couples who travelled there to marry, many of whom were Australian. In the first year of marriage equality (from 19 August 2013), 58% of same-sex marriages conducted in New Zealand were between New Zealand citizens, whereas 26% were between Australian citizens (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Additionally,

the number of civil unions between same-sex partners dropped significantly after the introduction of same-sex marriage, from an average of about 300 per year in the period from 2005 when civil unions were introduced, to under 60 per year from 2014 (Statistics New Zealand, 2018).

II. Data and methods

Data on Australian marriages are an administrative by-product of the legal requirement to register all marriages and are the responsibility of each state or territory registry. All couples must lodge a *Notice of Intended Marriage* (NOIM) at least 1 calendar month before their desired marriage date, and both the requirement and lodgement form are uniform across the country. However, not all data are consistently entered into the different registry systems.

With the changed marriage law legislation coming into effect on 9 December 2017, same-sex couples could not marry until 9 January 2018, although some exceptions were granted for those with special circumstances. Marriage data are recorded by the registry associated with the place of solemnization, which may not be the same as the state or territory of usual residence of the married partners. Non-residents can legally marry in Australia, regardless of whether that marriage is recognized by their home country. Because we requested a record of all marriages, non-resident marriages performed in Australia were included in the data but could only be identified by assumptions based on the partners' usual residence and linked to their country of birth.

Access to individual record data on all marriages registered in the 2018 calendar year was separately negotiated with each registry. Generally, the data included jurisdiction of marriage (the state or territory where the marriage was solemnized); and, for each partner, their sex (male, female, or X, which refers to indeterminate/intersex/unspecified); age (calculated at time of marriage from date of birth); previous marital status (never married, divorced, widowed); country of birth (sometimes provided as place of birth); and usual residential address (in most cases reported by postcode).⁽⁴⁾ The number of children born in previous marriages of either partner was also included if these data were entered into the registry system. The NOIM only counts children born within a previous marriage and excludes any child born to other types of relationships, such as a registered same-sex partnership.⁽⁵⁾ It provides no direction on whether to include adopted children, and we assumed that these were also excluded.

(4) In the collection of data on self-reported sex, the Australian Attorney-General's Department required government departments and agencies to progressively align their existing and future business practices with Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender. This means a person could identify their gender as male, female, or non-specific.

(5) The data collection in the NOIM states 'Number of children of the previous marriage or marriages born alive (whether now living or deceased)'.


The unit record data were cleaned and additional categorization applied. Country of birth was initially coded to Australia or Overseas. The presence of children from a previous marriage was coded as yes or no, rather than the number of children, because these data were not provided consistently and the Registries of Queensland and Western Australia did not provide any data on the presence of children. Partners' usual residence was generally coded from postcode data and converted to Greater Capital City Statistical Area or Rest of State/Territory regions using geographical concordance tables.⁽⁶⁾ This was the most detailed geography that could be consistently applied to the data received; it is significant because the ABS only reports marriages based on marriage jurisdiction, not partners' usual residence. The Queensland registry could not provide consistently coded usual residence data; therefore, marriages solemnized in Queensland were excluded from the spatial analysis. Most married partners identified the same usual residence, which we assumed to be their residence after marriage. Where one partner supplied an overseas address, the Australian address was always used.

Age difference, the absolute difference between each partner's age at marriage, was calculated for each record, and marriage type (same-sex or different-sex) was derived from the sex of each partner. This procedure identified same-sex and different-sex marriages, and within same-sex marriage the sex of those marrying. The couple's mean age was calculated as the average of both partners' ages, while the median age of couples was calculated for individuals in each marriage type, and is the middle value of the ordered ages of all partners. Persons marrying for the first time could be identified by previous marital status (i.e. never validly married). Simple descriptive statistics were calculated covering sociodemographic characteristics of the marriage partners (people variables) and the type of marriage (marriage variables), including counts, percentages, and rates.

We made some limited comparisons between married same-sex couples and 2016 census data on cohabiting same-sex couples based on responses to the census questions on relationship and sex. About 90,000 people indicated they were a husband, wife, or partner in a same-sex relationship, and the ABS identified 46,800 same-sex cohabiting couples as a family type (ABS, 2018). This figure represents slightly less than 1% of all couples in Australia.

1. Calculation of marriage rates

The denominator of same-sex marriage rates was based on estimates of the Australian sexual minority population for males and females in mid-2016 and includes people who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other sexual minority. The population estimation process included averaging the rate of identification as other than heterosexual across two Australian nationally

(6) Sourced from the Australian Government, <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-23fe168c-09a7-42d2-a2f9-fd08fbd0a4ce/details?q=correspondence%20ASGS%202016>

representative survey datasets (the 2014 General Social Survey and the 2012 and 2016 waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia survey) and applying these proportions to official ABS population estimates for 2016. The various residual categories in the sexual identity question (*don't know*, *not stated*, and *refused*) were included in the denominator totals. Combined with an unknown willingness of people to self-identify, the estimates probably underestimate the total sexual minority population (Wilson *et al.*, 2020b).

Same-sex marriage rates (MR) were calculated based on these estimates of the male ($n = 328,306$) and female ($n = 323,474$) sexual minority population at risk of marriage. These rates pertain to the population aged 18 and older in 2016 (Wilson *et al.*, 2020b). To enable comparison with the heterosexual population, the marriage rate for different-sex marriages was also calculated based on the 2016 estimated adult resident population ($n = 18,751,964$) (ABS, 2016) at risk of marriage minus the total estimated sexual minority adult population ($n = 651,781$). Marriages between bisexual couples of different sexes could not be separately identified.

2. Data limitations

A fully nationally consistent dataset could not be collated because of the data inconsistencies described. Registration of a small number of different-sex marriages solemnized late in 2017 encountered a lag as systems were updated to support same-sex marriage entry. Furthermore, because registries do not update details of any marriage unless advised by the couple, some erroneous data can remain on record and will be present in the analysis.

In the 2016 census, registered relationships are not specifically identified by the available relationship categories, and marital status refers to registered marriages only. These data are 2 years older than the marriage data and do not include relationships beyond the household (living apart together). Additionally, they are likely to be impacted by the willingness and opportunity to report as a same-sex couple. Errors in the reporting of sex have been found to influence the accuracy of identifying cohabiting same-sex couples in the US census (Gates, 2006) and in the census of France (Banens and Le Penven, 2016).

III. Results

1. How many same-sex marriages were registered?

In the first year of the changed marriage legislation (2018), 118,536 marriages of all types were registered. Of these, 6,769 (5.7%) were same-sex marriages. The largest number of same-sex marriages was between female partners (3,921, or 57.8%), followed by marriages between male partners (2,831, or 42.0%). A small number of marriages was between partners who both identified

a non-specific sex ($n = 17$), and these were included in the overall count of same-sex marriages but excluded from the detailed analyses because of confidentiality concerns arising from such small numbers. A non-specific sex was provided for only one partner in another 41 marriages. These were treated as different-sex marriages in the total number of marriages but also excluded from the remaining analysis for the same reasons.

Table 1 presents the numbers, proportions, and rates for all marriage types and provides the data as a percentage of estimated cohabiting partners identified in the 2016 census. Although marriages as a proportion of census-identified cohabiting couples were almost identical for same-sex and different-sex couples (14.5%, 14.2%), female same-sex marriages were higher (17.0%), and male same-sex marriages lower (11.9%). The marriage rate for female same-sex marriage was calculated to be 12.1 per 1,000, higher than the male same-sex marriage rate of 8.6 per 1,000 and almost twice that of different-sex marriage (6.2 per 1,000). Three marriage types are referred to in this analysis as male–male marriages (also called gay marriages), female–female marriages (lesbian marriages), and male–female marriages (different-sex marriages).

Table 1. All marriages solemnized in 2018 by marriage type

	Number	Distribution (%)	As % of cohabiting couples ^(a)	Marriage rate (per 1,000)
Same-sex marriages				
Male–male	2,831	2.4	11.9	8.6
Female–female	3,921	3.3	17.0	12.1
X–X	17	< 0.0	n/a	n/a
Total	6,769	5.7	14.5	
Different-sex marriages				
Male–female	111,724	94.3	14.2	6.2
Female–X	29	< 0.0	n/a	n/a
Male–X	12	< 0.0	n/a	n/a
Total	111,765	94.3	14.2	
All marriages ^(b)	118,536	100		
(a) Using same-sex couples identified in 2016 census.				
(b) Includes 2 marriages where sex was not provided for either partner.				
Note: X identifies partners with a non-specific sex and collected as 'indeterminate/intersex/unspecified'. There are differences in the number of marriages supplied by the registries to these authors and the 2018 marriages statistics released by the ABS (2019). These differences generally relate to the scope. ABS data are published by year of registration, and totals may be impacted by marriages solemnized in previous years but not registered until the following year. ABS did not count marriages between partners where both identified as a non-specific sex in their same-sex marriage total.				
Source: Authors' calculations using 2018 RBDM marriage data, ABS 2016 census.				

2. Who got married?

A summary of sociodemographic characteristics across the three marriage types is shown in Table 2. Differences in the age structure of same-sex marriages were clear, with much higher proportions of older gay marriages (37.3% of partners had a mean age over 50 years). Married lesbian partners were also

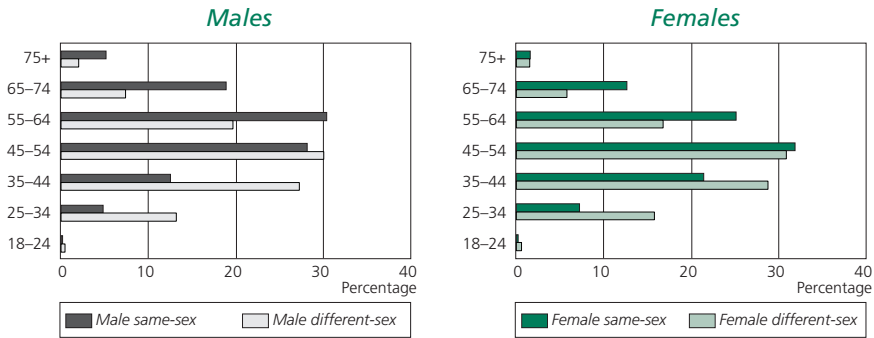
more likely to be older than different-sex marriage partners. The median age of all gay partners was 45 years, compared with 39 years for lesbian partners and 31 years for different-sex partners. These differences continued for the median age of those marrying for the first time. Census data showed the median age of cohabiting same-sex couples was similar (at 40 years), while it was 48 years for different-sex cohabiting couples, indicating they were significantly older than couples deciding to marry in 2018 (ABS, 2019). Marriages with a partner age difference greater than 5 years were much more likely to be same-sex marriages. Indeed, larger proportions of gay marriages had age differences between partners greater than 10 years, and more than 4% (not shown) had an age gap of 25 years or more.

Table 2. Characteristics of marriages solemnized in 2018 by marriage type

Variable	Male-male (%)	Female-female (%)	Male-female (%)
Mean age of couple (years)			
< 30	11.6	18.3	42.3
30-39	25.9	33.4	37.3
40-49	25.6	22.0	11.2
50+	36.8	26.4	9.2
Median age of partners at marriage (if first marriage)	45 years 43 years	39 years 36 years	31 years 30 years
Age difference (in years) between partners			
< 3	28.3	39.6	49.9
3-5	23.9	26.9	26.7
6-9	19.1	20.0	13.9
10+	28.6	13.5	9.5
Previous marital status at marriage			
At least one partner divorced	18.0	31.5	27.1
At least one partner widowed	0.4	0.8	1.3
Children from a previous marriage^(a)			
At least one of the partners	8.7	17.4	15.3
Country of birth of couple^(b)			
Both Australia	41.6	58.5	50.8
One Australia	39.0	24.2	25.9
Both outside Australia	19.9	17.3	23.1
(a) Not supplied for Queensland or Western Australian registered marriages.			
(b) Not supplied for Western Australian registered marriages.			
<i>Source:</i> Authors' calculations using 2018 RBDM marriage data.			

Table 2 highlights that one-third of all lesbian marriages involved at least one previously married partner, higher than for gay marriages (18%) and different-sex marriages (27%). Figure 2 compares the age profile of same- and different-sex couples by sex, emphasizing that differences between males and females who decided to marry were not only due to the difference in the age structure of marriage. Previously married gay partners were more likely to be aged 55-64, while the age range for lesbian partners was 10 years less. Previously married different-sex partners were younger and most likely aged 45-54, regardless of their sex.

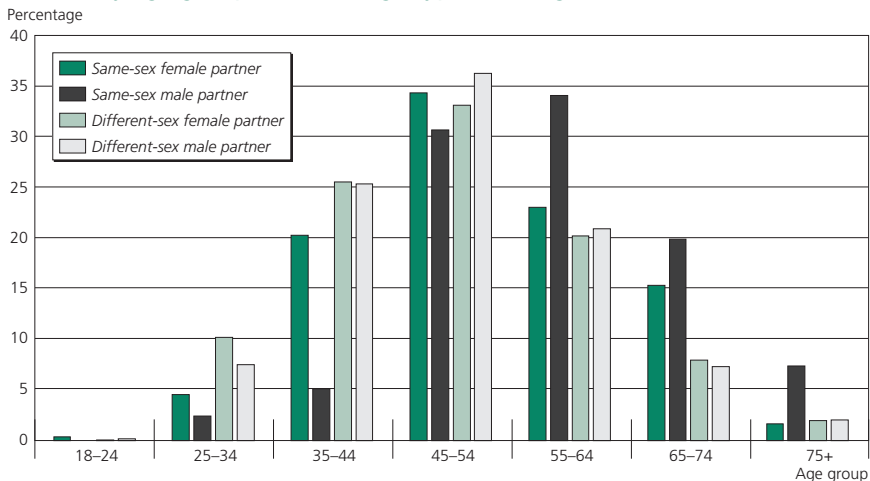
Figure 2. Percentage of previously married partners by sex, age group, and marriage type, marriages solemnized in 2018



Source: Authors' calculations using 2018 RBDM marriage data.

About 17.4% of lesbian marriages included at least one partner who had children born in a previous marriage, which is higher than for different-sex marriages (15.3%) and twice as high as gay marriages (8.7%) (Table 2). The age profile of lesbian partners bringing children from a previous marriage was also much younger than that of gay partners (Figure 3). Less than 10% of gay partners with children were under the age of 45 compared with a quarter of lesbian partners, while 27.4% of gay partners with children from a previous marriage were 65 or older (not shown in Table 2), 10 percentage points higher than lesbian partners.

Figure 3. Married partners with children born in a previous marriage by age group and marriage type, marriages solemnized in 2018



Source: Authors' calculations using 2018 RBDM marriage data.

Nearly 60% of all gay marriages involved at least one partner born overseas (58.9%), while for lesbian marriages a similar proportion had both partners born in Australia (58.5%) (Table 2). Further analysis of the country of birth

of partners in gay marriages is presented in Table 3. These data show that the highest proportion of marriage partners of Australian-born gay men were from South-East Asia⁽⁷⁾ (22.6%), followed by United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland⁽⁸⁾ (20.3%). Where both gay partners were born overseas, most were born in South-East Asia (25.0%), and a further 18.9% were born in the region of Chinese Asia.⁽⁹⁾ These results could be viewed in the context of Australia's early legislative acknowledgement of same-sex partners in immigration sponsorship and the greater acceptance of sexual minorities and marriage equality in Australia than in most Asian countries.

Table 3. Distribution (%) of country of birth of male partners in same-sex marriages solemnized in 2018

Region of birth	One partner born outside Australia	Both partners born outside Australia
South-East Asia	22.6	25.0
UK and Ireland	20.3	14.7
Europe (rest)	15.5	9.7
Chinese Asia	7.9	18.9
New Zealand	7.4	5.3
North America	6.6	3.3
South America	5.3	6.4
Middle East and Africa	5.4	6.1
Japan and Koreas	3.5	1.9
Southern Asia	2.2	6.6
Other	3.2	2.1
Total	100	100
N	985	1,024

Source: Authors' calculations using 2018 RBDM marriage data.

3. Where do married same-sex couples live?

Excluding all couples who married in Queensland (for which we have no place of usual residence data), 77.0% of same-sex married couples lived in greater capital city areas, while the remaining share lived in the regions outside. As a population rate, this equates to 36.2 same-sex marriages per 1,000 marriages in capital city areas and 27.5 per 1,000 marriages in the regional areas. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the usual residence of couples in same-sex marriages relative to all marriages within each capital city region and the remainder of the state or territory. Circle size denotes the number of same-sex marriages, while shading identifies the rate of same-sex marriages per

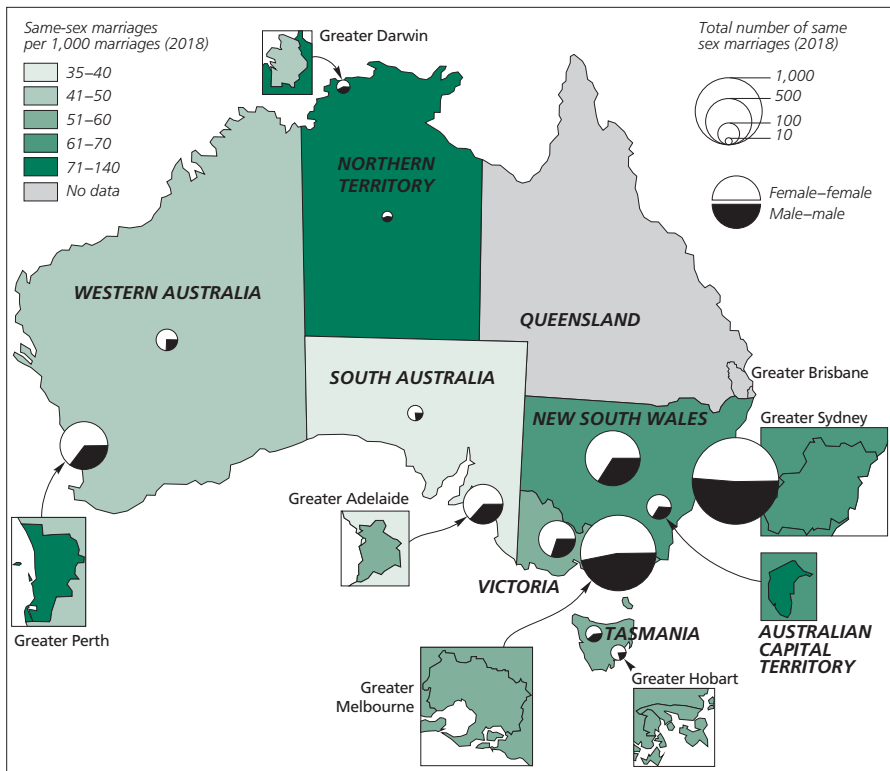
(7) South-East Asia (mainland and maritime) is identified in the ABS Classification of Countries. It includes Australia's regional neighbours of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

(8) United Kingdom plus the Republic of Ireland make up North-West Europe and excludes countries of Europe.

(9) Chinese Asia includes China, Taiwan, and Mongolia.

1,000 marriages. Both regions of New South Wales have high rates of same-sex marriage relative to total marriages, but the Rest of the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory stand out. The Rest of the Northern Territory (138.7 per 1,000) had the highest rate relative to the total number of marriages in the region, although it has a very small population (98,500) and had fewer marriages overall (156). The Australian Capital Territory followed with the second highest rate (79.6 per 1,000). Apart from the Greater Capital Cities of Melbourne and Sydney, married lesbian couples mostly dominate the geographic share of the other regions.

Figure 4. Number of same-sex marriages and number of same-sex marriages per 1,000 marriages by usual residence (Greater Capital City and Rest of State regions), marriages solemnized in 2018

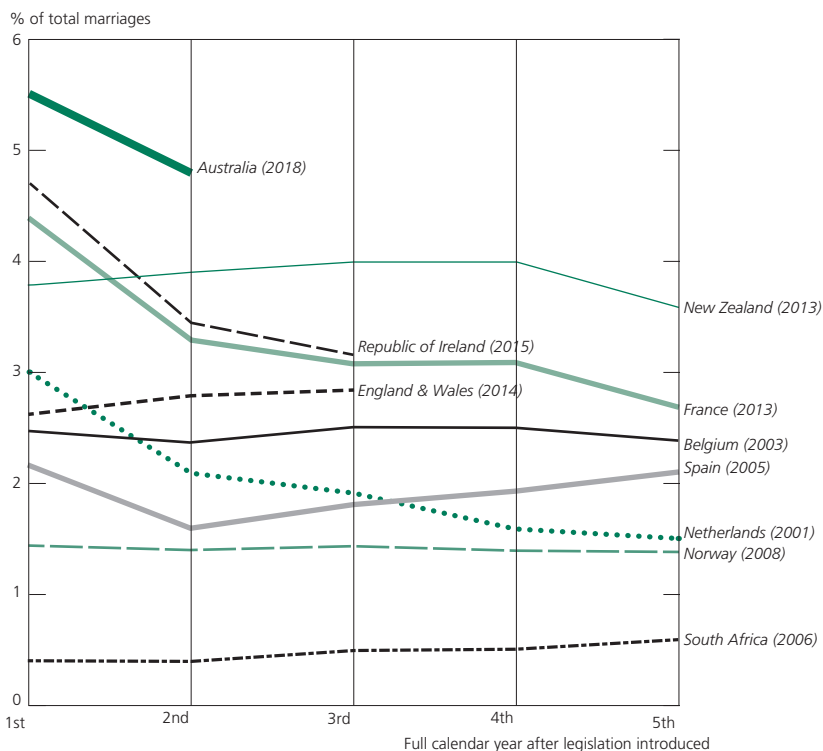


Note: Geographical distribution data unavailable for Queensland.
Source: Authors' calculations using 2018 RBDM marriage data.

4. How does the Australian experience of same-sex marriage compare internationally?

Same-sex marriages as a proportion of all marriages are shown for a selection of countries in Figure 5 (source data supplied in Appendix Table A.1).

Figure 5. Same-sex marriages as a proportion of all marriages from the first full calendar year after legal recognition



Note: Data provided in Appendix Table A.1, as well as the number of marriages for the partial year same-sex marriage was recognized for each country.

Sources: National statistics offices; ABS Marriages and Divorces (2019, 2020).

Trends are identified for the first 5 full calendar years after marriage equality was recognized.⁽¹⁰⁾ Direct comparisons are problematic because of differences in the legislation defining marriage, differences in the availability of public data, and the month the changed marriage legislation was passed which will impact both the first partial year and the second full year. However, considering the shortcomings of international comparison, Australian same-sex couples appear to have embraced the opportunity to marry in 2018, with a comparatively high proportion in the first full calendar year (5.7%). Ireland had the closest comparable figure (4.7%). With its first marriage performed on 17 November 2015, Ireland's first full calendar year was similar to Australia in the month legislation was changed, allowing the first calendar year to more accurately define the 'pent-up demand' of same-sex couples to marry. France followed in terms of overall proportion (4.4%), then New Zealand (3.8%) and the Netherlands (3.0%). New Zealand's largest number of same-sex marriages

(10) The trends exclude the first partial calendar year of legal recognition of same-sex marriage.

(495 in 2017) was followed by a drop (to 375 in 2018), coinciding with the introduction of same-sex marriage in Australia (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Australian data for the second full year of marriage equality have been recently released, and at 4.8% of all marriages, it continues to show the strong willingness of Australian same-sex couples to marry (ABS, 2020).

Australia's first year of same-sex marriage saw more lesbian couples decide to marry than gay couples. This proportion contrasts with the first adopter of marriage equality, the Netherlands, which had higher proportions of gay marriages (57%) in its first year, along with France (54%), Belgium (58%), Ireland (57%), and Spain (78%), according to national statistics offices. Like Australia, New Zealand (63%), England and Wales (56%), and Norway (63%) had higher proportions of lesbian marriages in their first full calendar year.

IV. Discussion and conclusion

We assembled a unique Australian dataset on the demography of same-sex marriage in the first year of marriage equality. The year 2018 saw Australia record a high number of same-sex marriages as a proportion of all marriages, and an estimated marriage rate of 12.1 per 1,000 population for female same-sex marriage and 8.6 per 1,000 population for males. The observed proportion of same-sex marriages was also higher than that of a selection of other countries that introduced same-sex marriage before Australia. We observed an older age profile in the pioneer same-sex couples, consistent with other international research, and the long wait for marriage equality is likely to have influenced these outcomes with pent-up demand leading to higher numbers and older couples. Australia's first year equated almost exactly with a full calendar year, which introduces some bias to any direct comparison of results by country. However, the relatively high proportion of same-sex marriage in Australia's second year could also be a significant signal of the greater propensity of same-sex couples to marry in Australia (see ABS, 2020). The accompanying drop in median age of both married lesbian and gay couples in the second year (from 39.3 to 36.5 years and from 44.9 to 39.3 years, respectively; ABS [2020]) also follows international trends. The public acceptance of same-sex marriage demonstrated through Australia's same-sex marriage vote (Wilson et al., 2020a) and the growing acceptance of sexual minorities worldwide (Pouchter and Kent, 2020) may have provided the perception of a safer environment for same-sex marriage in Australia relative to the much earlier experience in some other countries. It will be of significant research interest to monitor how trends unfold in subsequent years.

Given these high rates of same-sex marriage in Australia, it is worth asking why marriage appears to be so important to the sexual minority population and whether the initial enthusiasm will continue. In the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults agreed that love, companionship,

and making a lifelong commitment were very important reasons to marry (Pew Research Center, 2013). But in addition, the importance of marriage to obtaining rights and social benefits was assessed as twice as high for LGBT adults compared to the general population (46% vs. 23%). By 2015, a US Gallup poll found that 45% of same-sex couples had married (Gates and Brown, 2015).⁽¹¹⁾ Although the institution of marriage has undergone significant transformation, studies have shown that married couples are happier or more satisfied than unmarried cohabiting individuals (Brown and Booth, 1996), although others suggest this gap may depend on differences across countries, religiosity, and employment status (Soons and Kalmijn, 2009). Marriage has been found to be positively related to health, income, and wealth (Carr and Springer, 2010; Vespa and Painter, 2011; Pirani and Vignoli, 2016), and it may even provide the relationship structure for more harmonious and longer lasting partnering (Waite and Gallagher, 2001). Using Swedish register data, Aldén et al. (2013) found evidence that gay men were more likely to use a legal committed partnership as a means of pooling their resources, while for lesbian women it appeared more important for family formation. Could this explain the high rates of same-sex marriage in Australia and perhaps the higher levels of female same-sex marriage?

These Australian marriage data may suggest that lesbian women have greater confidence in the institution of marriage to provide them legal, security and social status, and it may be of even greater importance to lesbian couples raising children. Our results show higher proportions of married lesbian partners brought a child or children born in previous marriages, double that for married gay partners. Power et al. (2010) showed one-third (34%) of Australian sexual minority parents conceived at least one child in a previous heterosexual relationship, which is also consistent with our marriage data given the evidence of previous marriage for many of the same-sex partners. Marriage provides a strong legal framework for the sharing of parental rights to children born to either partner, to children adopted by one or both partners, and of course to children born within the marriage. Before the introduction of marriage equality, Australian census data identified around 8,400 children (aged up to 15 years) in same-sex couple families, and 25% of cohabiting female same-sex couples had at least one child present in their households (ABS, 2018). The feminization of same-sex marriage because it legally protects different pathways to parenting is reinforced by recent research in overseas trends (Meslay, 2019; Kolk and Andersson, 2020). The international data presented in this paper may also suggest that the countries with more recent experiences of marriage equality have higher proportions of female same-sex marriages. Data from the United States identified that proportionally fewer same-sex couples were raising children over time, and Gates (2015) linked this to decreasing social conformity that may have pushed sexual minorities into early

(11) US Gallup polls began in 2008 to track opinions of American people on political issues and major social events affecting their lives. About 500 adults aged 18 and older are interviewed by phone each day.

heterosexual relationships. Since 2010, growing numbers of same-sex couples were accessing assisted reproductive technologies and surrogacy to have children within their relationship (Gates, 2015). It may follow that access to artificial insemination and associated rebates from the Australian healthcare system will increase for married lesbian couples. However, discrimination against LGBT people remains because of the current distinction between 'social' and 'medical' infertility (Gorton, 2019). Pathways to assisted parenting are even more complicated for gay couples, and future research could investigate whether the opportunity to marry increases child surrogacy and adoption within gay marriages. Higher proportions of gay couples with children decided to marry (9%), compared with the total identified as male–male cohabiting couples with children (4.5%) (ABS, 2018), suggesting family formation legalized through marriage may also be an important factor in the decision to marry for some gay couples.

The higher likelihood of gay marriages having at least one partner born overseas could be viewed in the context of immigration law within Australia. Despite taking longer to introduce marriage equality, Australia was progressive in acknowledging same-sex relationships, being one of the first countries to allow same-sex partners to be sponsored in 1991. Between 1997 and 2004, partner-sponsored visas granted to gay men (519) were more than double those of lesbian women (236), and gay Asian migrants made up the largest group (Yue, 2008). If this differential has continued, the pool of overseas-born gay partners would be larger and may have contributed to the larger proportion of Asian partners seen in our marriage data. Yue (2008) explored the dominant mode of gay Asian–Australian partnership, where the Australian partner is an older Caucasian and the Asian partner is a younger man. This model of sexual intimacy could explain some of the large age differences found in Australian gay marriages, as well as the protections provided by marriage for wealth transmission and other inheritances (Meslay, 2019). But the motivation to marry for gay couples in general requires more investigation.

A large body of research continues to identify gay and lesbian clustering or 'queer' geographies as important to feelings of solidarity, safety, political identity, and social support, and to avoiding homophobic behaviours and attitudes (e.g. Wotherspoon, 1991; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Faro, 2000). Australian research using census-identified same-sex couples found that outside the state capitals, only a small number of regional centres existed with an above-average concentration of same-sex couples (Forrest *et al.*, 2019). However, neighbourhood clustering appeared less important over time and even less important for couples with children (Forrest *et al.*, 2019). In the Australian same-sex marriage data, mapping the distribution of same-sex marriages has been limited, but it adds to the understanding of where married same-sex couples live. Results confirm that Sydney remains a significant part of Australia's gay geography; they also showed married lesbian couples are generally more evenly

distributed across the capital city and regional geography than married gay couples are. Surprisingly, both Australian territories had a unique attraction for married gay and lesbian couples, but probably for different reasons. The Australian Capital Territory is the nation's capital, highly urbanized and highly educated, which is likely to attract sexual minorities (Carpenter and Gates, 2008). In contrast, the Northern Territory stands out in Australia as the least populated jurisdiction, relatively isolated, remote, and even more sparsely populated outside the greater capital city. The main town in this region is Alice Springs, which was identified in the research by Forrest et al. (2019) as one of the few regional centres with a significant number of same-sex couples. Perhaps the clustering associated with this geography is even more particular to place, and another level of attraction may operate within extreme remoteness.

A result that could not be further discussed in this paper was the number of same-sex marriages where both partners identified a non-specific gender ($n = 17$) and that of different-sex marriages where one partner identified a non-specific gender ($n = 41$). This tiny minority is usually hidden within national datasets, so their appearance here is noteworthy.

That same-sex marriage in Australia has been embraced so wholeheartedly by sexual minorities poses new questions for demographers, particularly in the areas of fertility (how many are likely to conceive or adopt children?), mobility (will labour force and fertility decisions influence where couples decide to settle?), and well-being (will there be differential experiences of discrimination in service provision?). Our research has been necessarily limited by the available sociodemographic variables collected in the process of Australian marriage registration, but this same limitation provides a demographic description on which to base future research enquiry. Increased opportunities to identify same-sex marriages become available from the next census (2021) with improved prospects for use of household, economic, and health information to better inform their circumstances.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1. Comparison of same-sex marriage data across select countries

Country	Date of recognition	Marriages in first partial year ^(a)	Female–female marriages ^(b) %	% total marriages in each full calendar year after introduction				
				1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Netherlands	April 2001	2,414 marriages	43.5	3.0	2.1	1.9	1.6	1.5
Belgium	June 2003	245 marriages	41.8	2.5	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.4
Spain	July 2005	1.1% of total	21.6	2.2	1.6	1.8	1.9	2.1
South Africa	December 2006	80 marriages	n.p.	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.6
Norway	June 2008	1.1% of total	62.9	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.4
France ^(c)	May 2013	7,367 marriages	41.5	4.4	3.3	3.1	3.2	2.8
New Zealand ^(d,e)	August 2013	354 marriages	63.0	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.6
England/Wales ^(e)	April 2014	4,850 marriages	56.1	2.6	2.8	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ireland	November 2015	91 marriages	44.1	4.7	3.5	3.1	n/a	n/a
Australia ^(f)	December 2017	n.p.	57.8	5.5	4.8	n/a	n/a	n/a

(a) Number or proportion of marriages in the year same-sex marriage was introduced.
(b) Proportion of female–female marriages in year same-sex marriage was introduced.
(c) France except Mayotte until 2014, including Mayotte from 2014.
(d) All same-sex marriages including those between non-residents of New Zealand. Transfers from civil union to a marriage are not included.
(e) Not included are same-sex civil partnerships converted to marriages.
(f) Australian data sourced from ABS to make series comparable across both years. No data published on same-sex marriage in 2017. The legislation did not take effect until 9 January 2018; however, a small number of compassionate exemptions were made by the marriage registrars. Estimates of the proportions of same-sex marriages in the first full year after legalization may vary slightly depending on the source (5.5% or 5.7%); see Note to Table 1.
n/a = not available; n.p. = not published.
Sources: National statistical offices.

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Fiona SHALLEY, Tom WILSON • THE DEMOGRAPHY OF AUSTRALIA'S SAME-SEX MARRIAGE 'PIONEERS': RESULTS FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE EQUALITY

In late 2017, Australia became the 27th country to legalize same-sex marriage, although little is known about the partners' characteristics. To present a demographic profile of the same-sex couples who married, we assembled a unique dataset of all Australian marriages in 2018 using information supplied by state and territory registries. Estimates of Australia's sexual minority population allowed us to calculate crude marriage rates for the population aged 18 and older for the first time. The rate of female same-sex marriage was higher than that of male same-sex marriage and nearly double that for different-sex marriage. Partners in same-sex marriages were generally older, and female same-sex marriages were more likely to include children born in a previous marriage. The Australian marriage data are consistent with many observations about same-sex marriage in a selection of other countries, but higher proportions of same-sex marriages were recorded in Australia's first year compared to initial trends in these countries.

Fiona SHALLEY, Tom WILSON • LA DÉMOGRAPHIE DES MARIAGES DE MÊME SEXE EN AUSTRALIE : RÉSULTATS DE LA PREMIÈRE ANNÉE APRÈS LEUR LÉGALISATION

Fin 2017, l'Australie a été le 27^e pays à légaliser le mariage de couples de même sexe, mais on sait peu de choses sur les caractéristiques des conjoints. Pour établir le profil démographique de ces couples, un jeu de données sans équivalent concernant tous les mariages australiens en 2018 a été constitué à partir des informations figurant dans les registres des États et des Territoires. Les estimations de la population représentée par ces minorités sexuelles en Australie ont permis pour la première fois de calculer des taux de nuptialité pour la population âgée de 18 ans et plus. Le taux de nuptialité des couples de femmes était supérieur à celui des couples d'hommes, et près de deux fois supérieur à celui des conjoints de sexe différent. Les couples d'époux de même sexe étaient généralement plus âgés, tandis que les mariages de couples de femmes avaient plus de chance de compter des enfants nés d'un précédent mariage. Les données sur le mariage en Australie et les nombreuses observations portant sur les mariages de couples de même sexe dans une sélection d'autres pays sont cohérentes, mais les chiffres enregistrés en Australie ont été supérieurs à ceux mesurés dans les autres pays la première année suivant la légalisation.

Fiona SHALLEY, Tom WILSON • LA DEMOGRAFÍA DEL MATRIMONIO ENTRE PERSONAS DEL MISMO SEXO EN AUSTRALIA: RESULTADOS DEL PRIMER AÑO TRAS LA LEGALIZACIÓN

A finales de 2017, Australia fue el 27^o país en legalizar el matrimonio entre parejas del mismo sexo, pero se sabe poco sobre las características de los cónyuges. A fin de establecer el perfil demográfico de esas parejas, se ha constituido un conjunto de datos único sobre todos los matrimonios australianos en 2018, a partir de la información contenida en los registros estatales y territoriales. Las estimaciones de la población de minorías sexuales en Australia han permitido por primera vez calcular las tasas de nupcialidad de la población de 18 años o más. La tasa de nupcialidad de las parejas femeninas es superior a la de las parejas masculinas y casi duplica la de las parejas de distinto sexo. Las parejas del mismo sexo son generalmente mayores, y los matrimonios de mujeres pueden tener hijos nacidos de matrimonios anteriores. Los datos sobre el matrimonio en Australia y las numerosas observaciones sobre el matrimonio entre personas del mismo sexo son coherentes con los de otros países, pero las cifras registradas en Australia el primer año fueron superiores a las observadas en los demás países que acaban de abrir el matrimonio a todas las parejas.

Keywords: same-sex marriage, same-sex partnering, marriage equality, Australia, sexual minorities