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Census: Mich. same-sex households up 42 percent

 By JOHN FLESHER
 Associated Press

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) -- Five years after tying the knot with her female partner, Denise Brogan-Kator took great pleasure in describing herself as married when filling out a 2010 U.S. census questionnaire.

"It felt empowering ... very authentic," said Brogan-Kator, executive director of Equality Michigan, a gay rights advocacy group. "It felt like an acknowledgement of our existence."

Michigan has 21,782 households led by same-sex couples, according to census data released Thursday. That's a 42 percent increase over the 15,368 reported in the 2000 census, which experts say reflects a nationwide trend and growing acceptance of homosexuality and nontraditional family structures.

Still, the numbers suggest that less than 1 percent of Michigan's 3.8 million households are run by same-sex couples, which advocates and experts say reflects continuing reluctance on the part of many gay and transgender people to go public.

According to the census, in 2010 there were 12,483 Michigan households led by female couples, a 55 percent increase over 8,075 a decade earlier. The number led by male couples rose 28 percent, from 7,293 to 9,299.

Although the census refers to such households as being led by "unmarried partners," it does not explicitly describe them as gay, lesbian or transgender. Nor does it enable single people to describe their sexual orientation. That means the census does not measure the number of homosexual people in Michigan or nationally.

Later this year, the U.S. Census Bureau plans to release data showing how many same-sex couples described themselves as married. Although Michigan doesn't recognize same-sex marriages, some of the state's same-sex couples may have gotten married in states that do. Brogan-Kator and her spouse, Mary Kator, were married in Canada and now live in Milford.

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The bureau said the 2000 and 2010 numbers weren't entirely comparable because of technical differences in how they were processed. Still, demographers said there was clearly a significant increase in the number of same-sex couples reporting themselves as such.

"It definitely points out that things are changing a great deal," said Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit, a demographic research agency. "Obviously people are feeling much more comfortable to come out and couple up and identify themselves that way on the questionnaires."

Brogan-Kator said outreach efforts by the government and gay rights groups were partly responsible for the higher numbers of same-sex couples counted in the 2010 census. But she also credited an increasingly tolerant society.

"The climate has changed in Michigan and around the country," she said. "Ten years ago, gay and transgender people were still very much worried about physical safety, and being out was a big risk. We existed in roughly the same proportions that we exist today, but we were very careful about who we would say we existed to."

Like the rest of the U.S., Michigan remains divided over gay rights issues. Fifteen communities around the state have adopted anti-discrimination ordinances, but gay marriage is banned under a constitutional amendment adopted in 2004.

Wayne County had the highest number of same-sex households with 3,841, up 18 percent from 3,255 a decade earlier. Oakland County's total rose 50 percent, from 2,039 to 3,058, while Macomb County had a 62 percent jump, from 1,014 to 1,644.

Kent County went from 976 households to 1,484, up 52 percent. Saginaw County's number was up by one-third, from 282 to 373. Grand Traverse County had a 70 percent increase, from 131 to 223. In the Upper Peninsula, Marquette County had 132 same-sex households last year, a 35 percent increase from 98 in 2000.

Metzger said the data, while almost certainly under-reporting the number of households led by same-sex partners, should convince government officials to pursue more gay-friendly policies - to promote economic growth as well as social justice.

"If we want to be seen as a cool state that attracts young, creative, educated people, we can't just look at immigrants," he said. "We have to be seen as attractive to the gay population."

Gary Glenn, president of the American Family Association of Michigan, said the real message from the census results is that gays make up such a small portion of the population that the increase of same-sex households is irrelevant.

"It just makes the point all the more that public policy in this state should not be driven or dictated by such a tiny fringe minority of society," said Glenn, who is seeking the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate next year.

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