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America's Top Gay Cities

by *Richard Florida*

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From the obvious (San Francisco) to the surprising (Columbus), Richard Florida and Gary Gates crunched the numbers to come up with the gayest cities in the country.

The U.S. metropolitan region with the largest concentration of gay and lesbian people is San Francisco. That's not exactly news, but there are more than a few surprises in the Gay/Lesbian Index's metro-area rankings. Developed by [Gary Gates](#), a demographer at UCLA's [Williams Institute](#), the Gay/Lesbian Index value tells you how the proportion of same-sex couples among all households of a given metro area compares to the average for the entire U.S. An index value of 2, for example, means that the proportion of same-sex couples in that metro area is twice that of the nation.

[View Our List of the Top Gay Cities](#)



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New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington, D.C., Boston, San Diego, Denver, Seattle, and Portland, Oregon, all make the list of the 20 gayest metros. But so do Dallas, Columbus, Ohio, Santa Rosa and Sacramento, Springfield, Massachusetts, Portland, Maine, and college towns like Eugene, Oregon, Ann Arbor, Michigan and Ithaca, New York.

The idea that most gay people live in urban enclaves like the Castro in San Francisco or Chelsea in New York City is

something of a myth, Gates notes. "Gay people live everywhere," says Gates, "in cities, suburbs, and even in the country—one in seven same-sex couples live in rural areas." The 2000 Census found same-sex couples living in 99 percent of U.S. counties.

While politicians and voters continue to debate whether LGBT people have the right to marry, to adopt children, or serve openly in the U.S. military, a growing body of research suggests that considerable benefits accrue to those cities and metro areas that have sizeable, visible concentrations of gay men and lesbians. Income levels are higher, as are many other measures of life satisfaction.

Research I conducted with [Charlotta Mellander](#) revealed that metro areas with higher proportions of gay men and lesbians also have higher housing values—a finding that [landed me on *The Colbert Report*](#). A study I conducted with Gates in 2001 discerned a close association between regions with higher proportions of same-sex couples and concentrations of high-tech businesses. And there's more:

- [Ronald Inglehart's World Values Surveys](#) have found that tolerance in general, and tolerance toward gays and lesbians in particular, is associated with the shift to a more modern, more democratic, and more affluent "[post-materialist](#)" political culture.
- [Soul of the Community](#), a study conducted by the [Gallup Organization](#), found that more open and tolerant attitudes toward LGBT people (as well as to other groups) was one of two key factors, along with natural beauty and environmental quality, that corresponded with higher levels of satisfaction with and emotional attachment to a community.
- A [cross-national study](#) by [Marcus Noland](#) of the [Peterson Institute for International Economics](#) found that tolerant attitudes in general correlated with more open attitudes toward globalization, as well as with higher rates of economic performance.

As Gates and I have pointed out elsewhere, the presence of LGBT people isn't a sufficient condition for wealth creation in and of itself; gay men and lesbians are no more sophisticated, economically productive, innovative, or entrepreneurial than any other group on average. But places that attract gay people and lesbians tend to have the same open-minded attitudes and business styles that foster innovation. A visible LGBT community is the proverbial "canary in the coal mine," signaling openness to new ideas, new business models, and diverse and different thinking kinds of people—precisely the characteristics of a local ecosystem that can attract cutting-edge entrepreneurs and mobilize new companies.

The Gay/Lesbian Index is derived from data provided by cohabiting same-sex couples who responded to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 [American Community Survey](#). Statistics on same-sex couples provide the best (and only) available proxy measure to assess the geographic distribution of LGBT populations across metro areas, according to Gates' studies. Though same-sex couples are not representative of the entire LGBT community, Gates notes that it's probably a good bet that metro areas with relatively high proportions of same-sex couples will also have relatively high proportions of visible LGBT people, single and coupled. Though the ACS collects data from several million households, estimates of such small populations as same-sex couples living within cities or metro areas (about half of 1 percent of all households) are not very precise. That's why the Census Bureau provides both lower- and upper-bound figures for all its estimates. Gates based his rankings on the lower-bound estimates, which favors the bigger metro areas, ones that are known to provide more precise estimates.

Our national efforts at demographic data collection are manifestly failing to keep up with social change. Very few demographic or economic-oriented surveys ask about sexual orientation or gender identity; sample sizes in those few that do are too small to reliably estimate the size of LGBT populations in states, metros, and cities. Even the same-sex couple data used here presents challenges, as noted above. Our failure to gather reliable demographic data from large-scale sources has significant repercussions, Gates notes. "It handicaps scholars and advocates who want to study the characteristics and needs of the LGBT community. It hinders service organizations who want to address those needs and evaluate their programs, as they have no way to even estimate the size of their service

population.” Perhaps most importantly, he stresses, it renders invisible a population still subject to stigma and discrimination. “If LGBT people don’t exist in data, it’s easy for legislators and polic makers to assume they don’t exist at all.”

Gary Gates conducted the demographic analyses. He is the Williams Distinguished Scholar at the [Williams Institute](#), [UCLA School of Law](#), and coauthor of [The Gay and Lesbian Atlas](#).

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