



Summary of Douglas W. Allen's

## **“High School Graduation Rates Among Children of Same-Sex Households”**

*Review of Economics of the Household* 11 (December 2013): 635–658,  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11150-013-9220-y>

Allen opens with a review of the same-sex-parenting literature. Out of fifty-three studies on same-sex parenting and child outcomes, fifty are unsuitable as sources of general information about children's welfare. These studies are (1) politicized, suggesting broad policy recommendations unwarranted by the evidence provided in the study, (2) focused on soft measures of child performance (such as subjective perceptions of self-esteem or stigma) rather than hard measures that can be replicated by third parties (such as visits to the hospital), and/or (3) based on small samples (averaging thirty to sixty respondents), nonrandom convenience samples, and/or low-powered statistical tests. Allen concludes, “A review of the same-sex parenting literature inevitably leads to the conclusion that it is a collection of exploratory studies.”<sup>1</sup>

Only three studies (Rosenfeld, 2010; Regnerus, 2012; Allen et al., 2013) employ large, random national data sets, placing them in a category apart from the others. Of these studies, one (Rosenfeld) defends the thesis that there are “no differences” among children of same-sex and opposite-sex households. Dr. Michael Rosenfeld used the 2000 U.S. Census to study the progress through school of children in the United States from different family forms. Rosenfeld concluded that children of same-sex families make normal progress through school and that there are no corresponding differences in outcomes between them and children from opposite-sex families.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, Allen offers analyses of high-school graduation rates in Canada, and his results ultimately challenge Rosenfeld's methodology and findings.

Allen relies upon the 2006 Canada Census for a large, random national probability sample of nearly two million children from six different kinds of families:



1. **Single-mother families** include both straight and lesbian mothers, because the Canada Census does not distinguish the sexual orientation of single moms.



2. **Single-father families** include both straight and gay fathers.



3. **Married heterosexual families** include opposite-sex couples in their original or a subsequent marriage. The Canada Census only records “current marital status” and does not ask whether the family includes a stepparent.



4. **Common-law households** include opposite-sex cohabiting couples who are not legally married. In Canada, common-law cohabitants enjoy the same legal rights and bear the same obligations as do married couples.



5. **Gay-father families** include married or unmarried cohabiting gay men. Canada has offered tax and government benefits to same-sex partners since 1997 and legal same-sex marriage since 2005. It does not include two men living together in a nongay relationship.



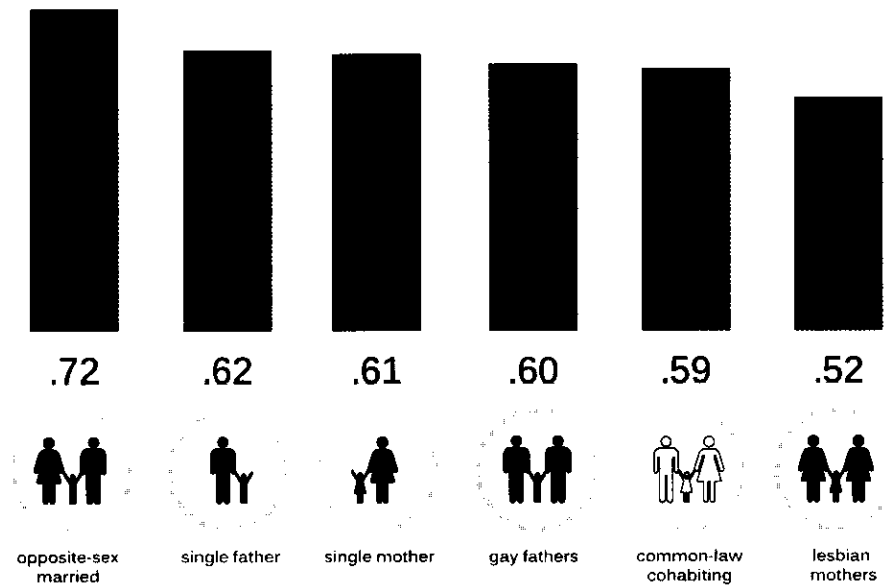
6. **Lesbian-mother families** include married or unmarried cohabiting lesbian women. Again, they do not include two women cohabiting in a different capacity.

## The Children

Allen restricts the sample to children from seventeen to twenty-two (around high-school age) and looks at two measures of child performance: school attendance and graduation probabilities. In the end, he finds that while gay and lesbian parents are as likely to send their children to high school as are opposite-sex parents, their children are significantly *less* likely to graduate. Specifically, the odds of children from gay-father families graduating are 69 percent as high as those of children from married heterosexual families, and the odds for children of lesbian-mother families are 60 percent as high.

In order to demonstrate just how robust the differences are among family structures, Allen guides the reader through a progression of scenarios in which the data is analyzed under different conditions. He begins with the unconditional, full-sample averages:

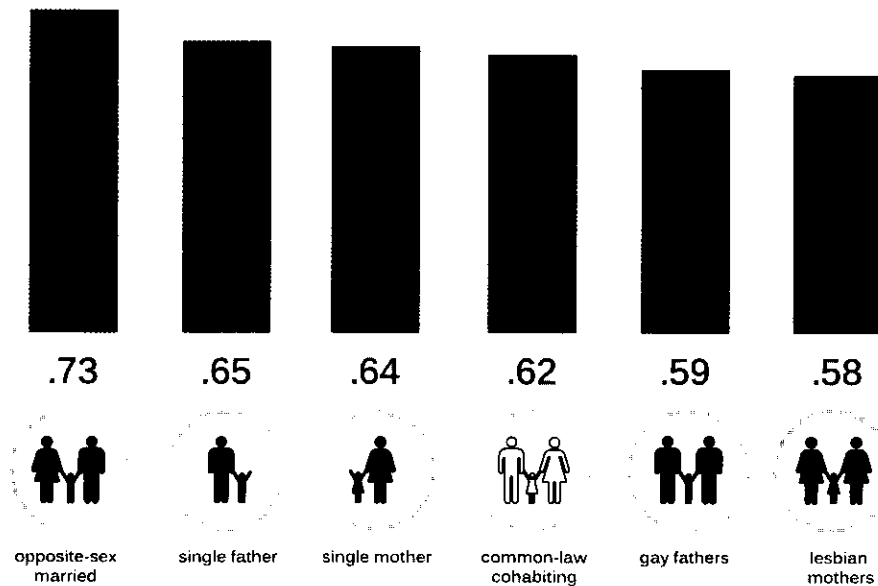
## High-school Graduation Rates (No Controls)



This graph presents graduation rates in their most rudimentary form, without controlling for any characteristics other than type of household. Already, these results show differences in graduation rates, with children from opposite-sex married homes coming out on top. The children of lesbian parents have the lowest graduation rates, and the children from the other family forms lie in-between these. However, these results do not account for alternative possible explanations that may be causing the children of same-sex parents to have lower graduation rates, along with children from single-parent or common-law-parent homes. For instance, children of same-sex couples could come from homes with a lower income, which could contribute to their lower graduation rates. Therefore, it is premature to conclude from this graph that family structure is strongly correlated with this outcome in the children. So, Allen plumbs deeper for alternative explanations.

In the next graph, Allen recreates one of Rosenfeld's analyses, this time with the Canadian data. Since Rosenfeld saw that same-sex households were strongly correlated with mobility, he decided to eliminate from the sample any families that had moved homes in the previous five years. His reasoning was that family disruption (such as divorce) could lead to a move, which would affect school performance for the child. By removing those families, Rosenfeld created a sample of children from relatively more stable homes. Allen tries this measure and finds the following results:

## High-School Graduation Rates with a Restricted Sample (Restriction: Families that Never Moved in Previous Five Years)

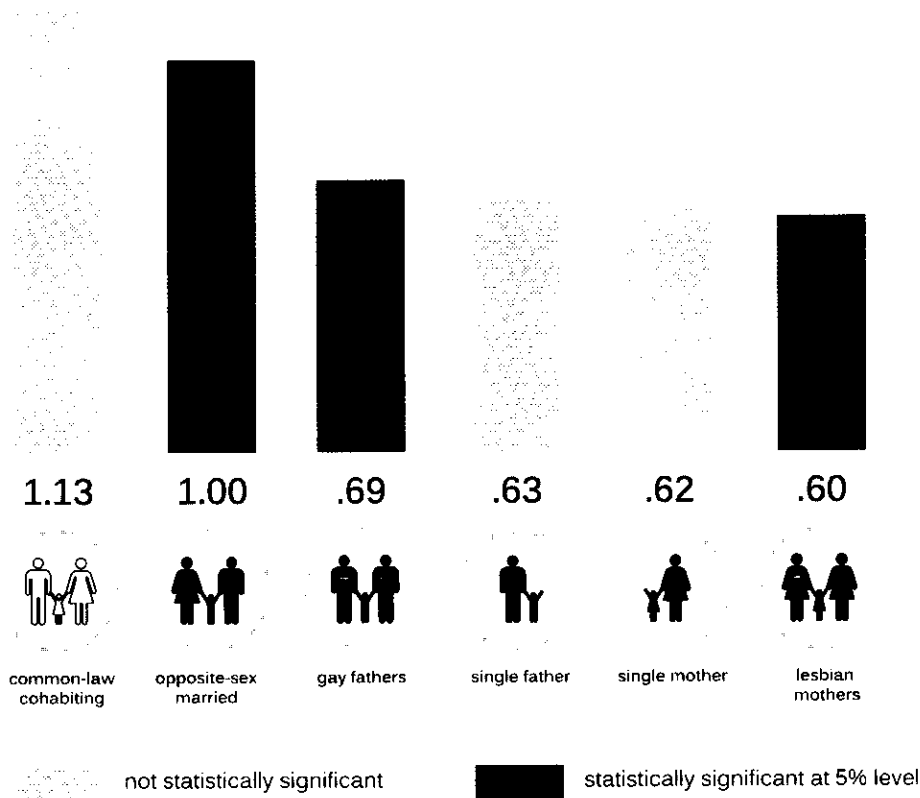


In this scenario, the findings are similar to before. Children from opposite-sex married homes come out on top, with children from lesbian-mother homes having the worst scores and all other families falling in-between these two. Additionally, in this scenario, the children from gay-father homes register lower graduation rates than in the previous scenario.

Allen then offers a different approach. He restores the full sample (i.e., includes the families that had moved within the past five years) but this time adds controls for child characteristics, parent education, and household marital status. Among the child characteristics, being disabled or having moved within the past year lowers the odds of a child graduating from high school, whereas being female, coming from an urban area, or coming from a family where everyone is the same race increases the odds of graduating. Children with parents who graduated from high school are twice as likely to graduate from high school as are children of parents who did not graduate. And children who come from a home where the parents have separated have poorer odds of graduating from high school. Allen controls for all of these child and parent characteristics so that none can be said to be the cause of the differences in outcomes.

The following graph shows the results when Allen controls for the above-mentioned factors:

### Odds Ratios of Child High-School Graduation (With Controls)

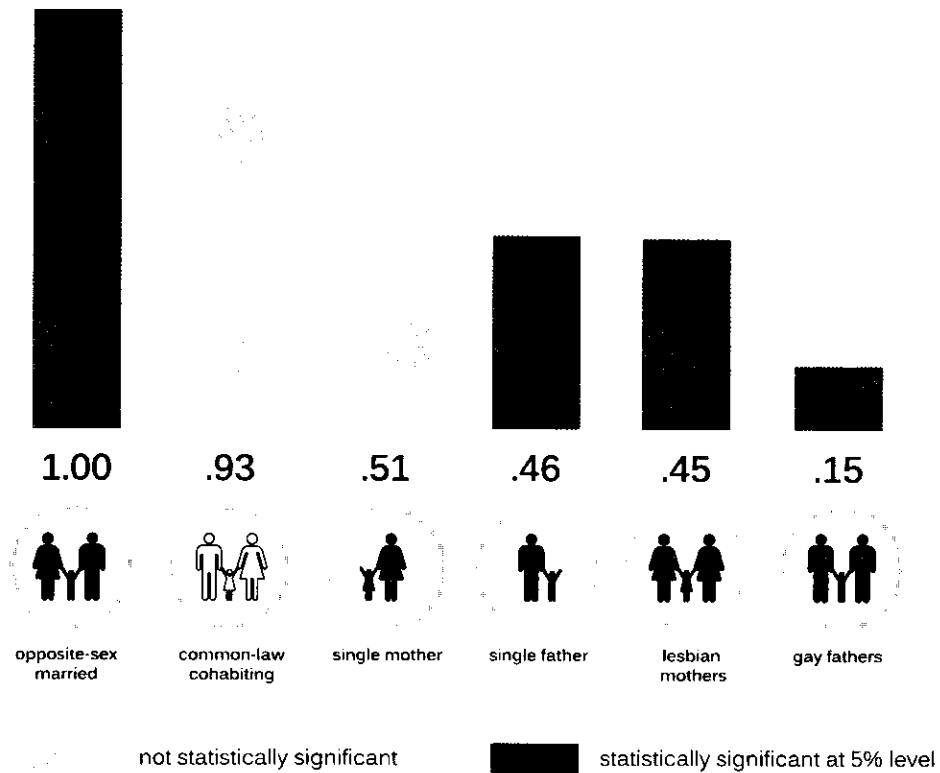


An “odds ratio” is a way to report the odds of something occurring, compared to something else occurring. In this case, Allen holds the control group (the children from opposite-sex married families) at 1.0, and he quantifies just how strongly having a different family structure is associated with having graduated from high school, when compared to the control group. The lower the odds ratio, the lower the association with graduating from high school. In the above graph, the bars shaded in pale orange are not statistically significant and so cannot be taken as dependable figures. The bars in bold orange represent the statistically significant results, robust enough to rely on. Looking at those numbers, the children from opposite-sex married homes come out on top, with the children from lesbian-mother homes reporting the lowest scores and the children from gay-father homes again lying in-between these two.

Note that in all three graphed scenarios, the relative rankings remain. While the numerical outcomes change, the relationship between the children from opposite-sex married families and the children from same-sex families does not.

Allen then asks a different question. Does it make a difference whether the child is a girl or a boy? The Canada Census allows him to identify the gender of the children in each particular same-sex household, so he restricts the sample to either boys or girls. The following graphs the odds ratios for the girls, with controls for child and parent characteristics, as before.

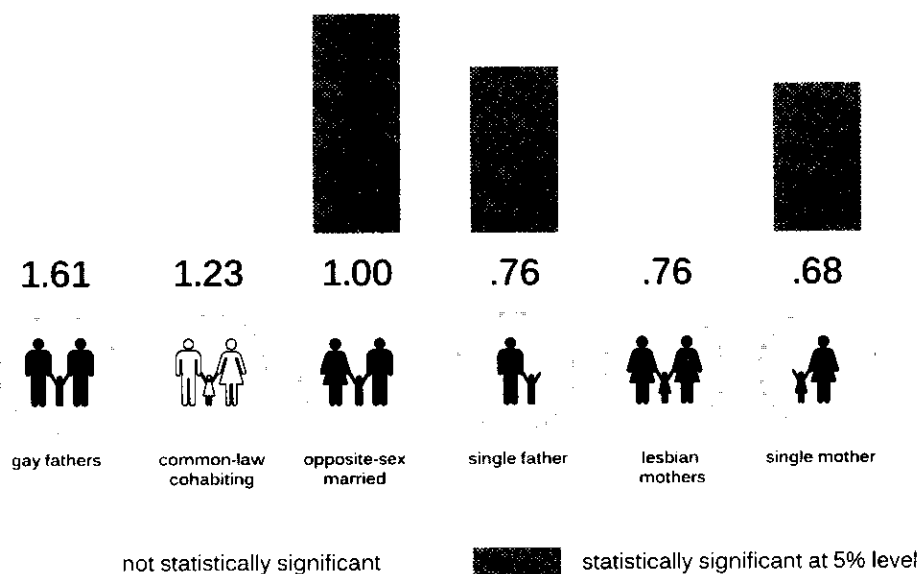
## Odds Ratios of Child High-School Graduation (Girls Only, with Controls)



Here, the girls living with two gay fathers perform the poorest of all possible combinations, with an odds of graduating only 15 percent as high as that of children living with opposite-sex married parents. Girls living with two lesbian mothers perform better, with an odds of graduating 45 percent as high as those of children living with opposite-sex married parents. However, the girls living with a single father perform better than the girls living with two gay fathers, and girls living with two lesbian mothers perform about as well as girls with a single father. So the gender makeup of the parents makes a dramatic difference for the girls, and as far as high-school graduation is concerned, having a single parent turns out to be better for them than having two parents of the same sex.

As for the boys, Allen was not able to provide statistically significant estimates, given the sample constraints:

### Odds Ratios of Child High-School Graduation (Boys Only, with Controls)



The only findings that were statistically significant were those for boys in single-father and single-mother homes. The results for boys in same-sex households were not robust enough to be reliable. However, it is interesting to see that even here, gender appears to make a difference. Allen proposes the thesis that “sons do better with fathers, and daughters do better with mothers.”<sup>3</sup> He notes that greater investigation would be necessary to confirm this trend in the data but that the concept is not a novel one: “Within the child development literature and pop culture, there is the belief that mothers and fathers provide different parenting inputs that are not perfectly substitutable. These results would be consistent with this notion, but further research is necessary to show any causality.”<sup>4</sup>

As a result of these scenarios, Allen concludes that it is important to consider the gender makeup of the parents as well as the children. Lesbian parenting should be distinguished from gay parenting—not assuming that all “same-sex parenting” is the same. And the gender of the child should be noted—not assuming that boys and girls will respond in the same way to lesbian or gay parenting.

Because Allen’s conclusions are so different from those of Rosenfeld, Allen takes the time to discuss three reasons why he believes he came to such different findings.

First, Rosenfeld decided to exclude from the sample any same-sex couples who had changed dwellings within the five years previous to the survey. He excluded those families because same-sex couples are highly associated with mobility. In his words, “Most of the children being raised by same-sex couples at the time of the 2000 census had previously lived through divorce or parental break-up, which research has shown to be traumatic for some children.”<sup>5</sup> Rosenfeld thought it was unfair to include in the sample children who had experienced this kind of transition.<sup>6</sup>

However, Allen points out that the percentage of same-sex families associated with mobility was so high that when Rosenfeld excluded them from the sample, he created two bigger problems: first a statistical inability to distinguish the children from same-sex households from any other children, leading to a likely false null hypothesis (of “no differences” between children).<sup>7</sup> Second, when he removed these mobile families from the sample, he removed the very factor that could be responsible for the poor graduation rates—family instability due to marital breakup: “The increased chance of failing a grade—especially when the correlation magnitude is so close to that of single parents—could likely be the result of a previous divorce or separation since many children in same-sex households were initially born into opposite-sex families that later broke apart.”<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Allen does not exclude these families from his sample but rather includes them and then controls for marital history.

A second reason why Allen comes to a different conclusion is because of measurement errors associated with the 2000 U.S. Census, upon which Rosenfeld relied. Because of the Defense of Marriage Amendment (DOMA), the U.S. Census was not permitted to identify same-sex couples. So Rosenfeld had to make educated guesses about who was a same-sex couple, based upon more general answers to questions about gender and who was the head of the household. Rosenfeld made the best guesses he could, given the constraints, but this was a major limitation of his study. By contrast, because same-sex marriage was legal in Canada during the time of its census, Allen is able to rely on direct self-identification of same-sex couples, which yielded greater precision in identifying family structure.

Finally, Allen distinguishes between gay and lesbian households, whereas Rosenfeld groups them together in one category. This allows for greater precision in Allen’s findings.

For all of these reasons, Allen’s study of Canadian same-sex parents and child high-school graduation rates is more accurate than the Rosenfeld study, and it lends credibility to the claim that at present, the strongest empirical data on the academic market supports the conclusion that there *are differences* in child outcomes across family types and that children from opposite-sex married homes *outperform* their peers living in all other family structures, including same-sex-parented households, of which lesbian households tend to perform the poorest.

### Conclusion

Allen concludes that the “no differences” thesis of the vast majority of the literature on same-sex parenting is not warranted, based on the scientific merits of the research. After Allen analyses a new large, random sample from the 2005 Canada Census, he finds that children of gay and lesbian households demonstrate significantly lower odds of high-school graduation than do children from opposite-sex married parents. Moreover, Allen points out that these findings probably present a *rosier* picture for the children of same-sex families than exists in reality, because the Canada Census includes in the category of opposite-sex married parents, those who are married after a previous divorce. If Allen had been able to compare children of same-sex parents to a control group of children from *intact* (never previously divorced) opposite-sex married parents—what sociologists have called the “gold standard” for children—the graduation-rate estimates for children from these intact families probably would have been even higher, making the gap between the groups even more significant and worrying.

Allen ends by calling on the academic community to acknowledge the differences in child outcomes across family groups and investigate more carefully why these differences exist, by using more rigorous methodological designs and higher-quality statistical tests. He makes a clarion call for an “exceptional data set” that is very large, national, and random; relies upon self-reports of sexual orientation by parents; and has a retrospective design, with a timeline of each family’s transitions so that researchers can look more carefully into marital history and marital instability across family structures.<sup>9</sup>



## Notes

1. Allen, 642.
2. See Appendix: Michael Rosenfeld, "Nontraditional Families and Childhood Progress through School," *Demography* 47 (August 2010): 755–775.
3. Allen, 649.
4. *Ibid.*, 651–652.
5. Rosenfeld, 758.
6. *Ibid.*, 760.
7. Allen, 641.
8. *Ibid.*, 642.
9. *Ibid.*, 655.