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Metro & State

The Columbus Dispatch

SATURDAY

NOVEMBER 25, 2006 **D**

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Same-sex pairs on rise

More couples publicly affirming relationships, expert says

By Alayna DeMartini

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A lot more same-sex couples in Ohio are stepping out of the closet, at least for government surveys.

Between 2000 and 2005, Ohio had the sixth-highest percentage increase in the number of couples who said they were in same-sex relationships, U.S. Census figures show.

The Midwest had the largest increases reported in that period. Wisconsin had an 81 percent jump.

But the increases probably don't mean that a flood of gay people has moved to the nation's heartland, said Gary J. Gates, a senior research fellow at the University of California at Los Angeles.

"I think the Midwest had one of the biggest closets," said Gates, who studied the census results. "This is just more people being willing to check the box ... to say they are in a same-sex relationship."

The national debate on gay marriage might have prompted some gays to become more vocal about their sexual orientation, Gates said.

"This is the first time that gay people were being discussed on a regular basis in the media," he said.

The number of same-sex couples in Ohio jumped by about 62 percent, from 18,937 to 30,669.

The first time the census asked about same-sex relationships was in 1990.

Nationally, the number of same-sex couples grew by nearly 31 percent between

2000 and 2005, from 594,391 to 776,943, census results show. Most are male couples.

Central Ohio will take its own count of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender population with an online survey expected to be ready by February. Statewide, that group is about 3 percent of the state's population of more than 11.4 million.

The point of the local survey is to get a better idea of the size and needs of the gay population, such as health insurance or employment assistance, said Douglas Zelinski, who is heading the survey.

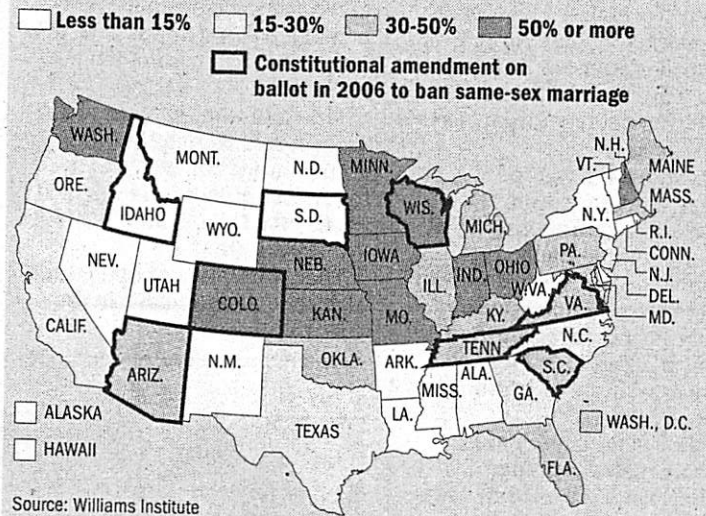
"This is a population that has had U.S. Constitutional amendments being written about them. I can imagine they feel marginalized," Zelinski said.

In November 2004, Ohio voters approved

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Counting same-sex couples

Ohio had a 62 percent increase in the number of couples who said they were in same-sex relationships from 2000 to 2005, ranking it as the sixth-biggest jump among the states.



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a constitutional amendment that bans gay marriage. Similar legislation has passed in a number of other states.

The central Ohio survey is being paid for by a \$40,000 grant, primarily from the United Way of Central Ohio.

The survey should help bolster the gay community's political clout, said Karla Rothan, interim director of Stonewall Columbus. The gay-rights advocacy group pushed for the survey.

The organization is advocating legislation that will require state employers to offer benefits for both partners in a same-sex couple, Rothan said.

Depending on the success of the survey, the United Way might survey other populations for which the agency has little information, said Kermit Whitfield, spokesman for the United Way.

The immigrant population would be one example.

Such surveys help the agency direct donations to where they are needed, Whitfield said.

"The world is replete with examples of programs that didn't work. Then people say, 'Well, didn't you know this?' about them."

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