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Debate on a Study Examining Gay Parents

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

Young adults from broken homes in which a parent had had a same-sex relationship reported modestly more psychological and social problems in their current lives than peers from other families that had experienced divorce and other disruptions, a new study has found, stirring bitter debate among partisans on gay marriage.

The study counted parents as gay or lesbian by asking participants whether their parents had ever had a same-sex relationship; the parents may not have identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Gay-rights groups attacked the study, financed by conservative foundations, as biased and poorly done even before its publication on Sunday in the journal *Social Science Research*.

But outside experts, by and large, said the research was rigorous, providing some of the best data yet comparing outcomes for adult children with a gay parent with those with heterosexual parents. But they also said the findings were not particularly relevant to the current debate over gay marriage or gay parenting.

About half the study participants with a gay parent, as defined in the study, were born out of wedlock and half into a traditional family that broke up. Many lived with the gay parent sporadically.

Paul Amato, a sociologist at Penn State who was not involved in the study and has written in favor of **same-sex marriage**, said that many scholars suspected that some children with a gay parent might have more troubles than the average child, particularly in past decades when the stigma was greater. "We know, for instance, that many people with a gay parent were essentially raised in a stepfamily, and went through a divorce, both of which are associated with modest but real disadvantages," he said.

Others said the study was limited in its usefulness. "What we really need in this field is for strong skeptics to study gay, stable parents and compare them directly to a similar group of heterosexual, stable parents," said Judith Stacey, a sociologist at New York University.

The study looked a nationally representative sample of 2,988 people ages 18 to 39. The study's author, Mark Regnerus, a sociologist at the University of Texas in Austin, said he sought financing from the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, N.J., and the Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee because government agencies "don't want to touch this stuff."

The participants answered questions about their current social, occupational and economic

experiences and their early life. They included 163 whose mother had a same-sex relationship and 73 whose father did. Just three of those who had lesbian mothers lived out their entire childhood with that parent, Dr. Regnerus said; none of those whose fathers had had a same-sex relationship lived full time with their fathers through childhood.

The study controlled for factors like parent education, income, the perceived level of tolerance for gays in each person's community and whether the child was bullied as a result of the parent's sexual orientation.

Participants who grew up in intact, traditional families reported the lowest average level of problems in their current life, like drug use, unemployment or depressive moods, the study found. Participants who grew up in nontraditional arrangements — with a single, heterosexual parent, in a stepfamily or in a family with a late divorce, for instance — reported higher levels of such problems as adults.

Those who said they had a parent who had had a same-sex relationship fared somewhat worse than those in other nontraditional families. For instance, 38 percent of those who had a lesbian mother said they were currently on public assistance, compared with 31 percent of those whose parents divorced late and 10 percent of those who grew up in a traditional family.

Compared with the traditional group, those with a gay parent reported less education on average and more sexual partners; the same was true of those who grew up in other nontraditional households, to a slightly lesser extent.

Dr. Regnerus said that the study did not include the number, or variety, of people with a gay parent that he would have liked. "This whole narrative of a gay couple raising a kid together, staying together — that kind of thing didn't exist much," when the participants were children, he said.

"When I look at his data, my main take-away is that divorce and family transition is not a great outcome for kids," said Gary Gates, a demographer at the at the University of California, Los Angeles, who was not involved in the study.