

NEW REPUBLIC

In Michigan, Same-Sex Marriage Goes to Trial Today. Opponents Will Cite This Study. Too Bad It's Already Been Discredited.

by Nora Caplan-Bricker | February 24, 2014

On Tuesday, when a federal court in Michigan hears arguments about the state's constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, a single study will play an outsize role. It's come to be known as the "Regnerus study"—after its author, Mark Regnerus, a University of Texas sociologist. Opponents of same-sex marriage say it's the best evidence yet that children raised by gay parents suffer a disadvantage. Most experts take a different view—like Darren Sherkat, the sociologist who was tasked with completing a definitive review in 2012, they think "[It's bullshit.](#)"

The study's formal title is "How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships?"—and it set off a storm of criticism almost immediately upon publication in 2012. *The New York Times*' Erik Eckholm [summarized it neatly](#) on Friday, but the story is worth revisiting here—primarily because, no matter how many times and ways other scholars try to discredit the study, it continues to shape policy in state legislatures and amicus briefs. Michigan is only the latest example.

Regnerus interviewed 3,000 young adults, including 248 who reported that at least one parent had engaged in a same-sex relationship. That group showed consistently lower psychological and behavioral wellbeing, Regnerus [said](#). And the largest gap, he reported, was "between the children of women who have had a lesbian relationship and those with still-married (heterosexual) biological parents."

A large group of Regnerus's peers were alarmed by his methodology. Some 200 of them [signed a letter](#) expressing "serious concerns about the scholarly merit of this paper." Among the problems they cited: The study classifies as "lesbian mothers" and "gay fathers" any people who have had same-sex relations since becoming parents. More than half of the subjects who Regnerus holds up as victims of same-sex parenting are, in fact, the products of heterosexual marriages that fell apart—they are part of his dataset because a parent later went on to have a same-sex partner, casual or otherwise. Regnerus judges the effect of "same-sex relationships" by looking at subjects who, for the most part, were not raised by a same-sex couple.

Many experts concluded that Regnerus had merely documented the well-established effects of broken families on kids—and nothing unique to same-sex parenting. That was the essential conclusion of the American Sociological Association, which has [rejected the study's findings](#) and said publicly: "If any conclusion can be reached from Regnerus's study, it is that family stability is predictive of child well-being."

Critics have also taken notice of the study's backstory, which would seem to suggest a clear political agenda—by the groups who funded it, and perhaps the scholar himself. As [Eckholm explains](#), Regnerus was recruited and his work partially funded by the [Witherspoon Institute](#), a religious-conservative research center. He also received \$90,000 from the Bradley Foundation, which backs conservative causes.

In addition, the University of Texas, where Regnerus works, hired an academic consultant named W. Bradford Wilcox who was a fellow at Witherspoon, and who had been in the institute's employ when the idea

for the study came about. As Zack Ford at ThinkProgress has [reported](#): “Regnerus reached out to Wilcox back in September of 2010 for input about ‘their hopes for what emerges from this project.’ Wilcox also suggested the study be pitched to the journal *Social Science Research*, where Wilcox sits on the editorial advisory board.” At one point, the president of the Witherspoon Institute, Luis [Tellez, wrote directly to Regnerus](#) to tell him, “It would be great to have this before major decisions of the Supreme Court” (a.k.a. the DOMA and Proposition 8 decisions on same-sex marriage).

After the study set off a media maelstrom, *Social Science Research* asked Sherkat, a member of its editorial board, to perform an audit into whether the journal had erred in publishing the study. His answer: yes. As Tom Bartlett at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* [reported at the time](#), three of the study’s six peer-reviewers were on record opposing same-sex marriage, and were “not without some connection to Regnerus,” [Sherkat wrote](#). “Obviously, the reviewers did not do a good job.”

Regnerus, for his part, has said he didn’t intend the study to serve as conclusive evidence in the same-sex marriage fight. “Plenty of social conservatives made more of it than it deserves, while many social liberals went in the opposite direction, mindlessly denouncing it as having nothing interesting to say at all,” he told *The Dallas Morning News* in a [defense of his work in June](#). Asked if a parent’s short-term, casual same-sex relationship could be relevant to how a child turned out, he replied that his dataset included such scenarios because it “is billed as a general overview” and “stability in such households was quite uncommon in the population at large.” He added, “How relevant a parent’s same-sex relationship experience is for a child’s upbringing is, of course, a viable empirical question, but ... not every good question has data to answer it yet.”

The denunciations of Regnerus’ work haven’t kept it from having influence. The study appeared in [amicus briefs](#) during the [DOMA and Prop 8](#) cases that went before the Supreme Court in 2013. According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), which has tracked mentions of the study, it has come up in legislative debates in [Hawaii](#), [Illinois](#), [Colorado](#), [Maryland](#), [Minnesota](#), [Rhode Island](#), and the U.S. [Congress](#). Before Regnerus was scheduled to testify in Michigan, his study was used as evidence in cases that went to court in Hawaii and New Mexico. Regnerus’ work has even influenced debates abroad—especially in Russia, where Yelena Mizulina, the chairwoman of the Duma’s committee on family, women and children, [cited him](#) to argue for a law banning same-sex adoption, which was [enacted this February](#).

The lawmaker who introduced a bill to allow the state to remove children from gay parents, Alexei Zhuravlyov, also [quoted](#) the study. (His bill was withdrawn before the Olympics, but could be reintroduced.)

HRC is currently [funding](#) a gay rights activist’s lawsuit against the University of Central Florida, which houses *Social Science Research*, seeking to obtain emails between editors and scholarly reviewers and other documents that could further explain how the journal allowed the study to go to print. But judging by the year and a half since publication, Regnerus isn’t going away—no matter what new information emerges.

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