

NEWS

Living as a minority in the hetero village

» LUCY MARKS, CRAIG BUTT, CAROLINE ZIELINSKI

Karen Di Stefano does not see her homosexuality as anything out of the ordinary. "It doesn't define who I am," says Ms Di Stefano, who has lived with her partner Amanda Harris in Frenchs Forest for three years.

"We're in the minority, I can see that, but it's like seeking out a community of people with red hair."

A Fairfax Media analysis of 2011 census data has found that almost 30 per cent of Australia's same-sex couples live in Sydney.

But 25 per cent of NSW suburbs with more than 500 families do not have any recorded same-sex couples living under the same roof.

Some of the largest suburbs with no recorded same-sex couples included Frenchs Forest, with 3334 heterosexual couples overall, Bossley Park (3183), Green Valley (2581), Fairfield West (2232) and Condell Park (2168).

Ms Di Stefano, 57, said she and Ms Harris did not register in the previous census, and cannot recall if they had an opportunity to do so.

"I live a 'normal' lifestyle, I live in a neighbourhood, I don't specifically seek out a gay community," she said.

"I have gay friends but I don't seek them out. We have no issues, we certainly walk down the street hand-in-hand."

According to the analysis, the suburb with the highest proportion of same-sex couples was Potts Point, where 20.9 per cent of the area's 1025 couples identified as either gay or lesbian. Other suburbs with a

large same-sex population included Darlinghurst, Surry Hills, Elizabeth Bay, Erskineville and Redfern.

Australian Lesbian and Gay Archive president Graham Willett said it was "almost certainly true that there were many gay people living in so-called 'non-gay' suburbs, but that their life experiences were

different, and would probably not turn up in a census survey like this".

It was only recently that the census "wanted to collect information on same-sex couples", he said.

"Until a few years ago, you couldn't even record information like this because the system would call it an error."

Sydney independent MP Alex Greenwich said it was not unusual that higher rates of same-sex couples are found in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

"Initially, gay and lesbian people are historically attracted to more urban areas because there is more tolerance and acceptance," he said.

Daniel Witthaus, the spokesman for the National Institute of Challenging Homophobia Education, has travelled around the country talking to gay and lesbian people.

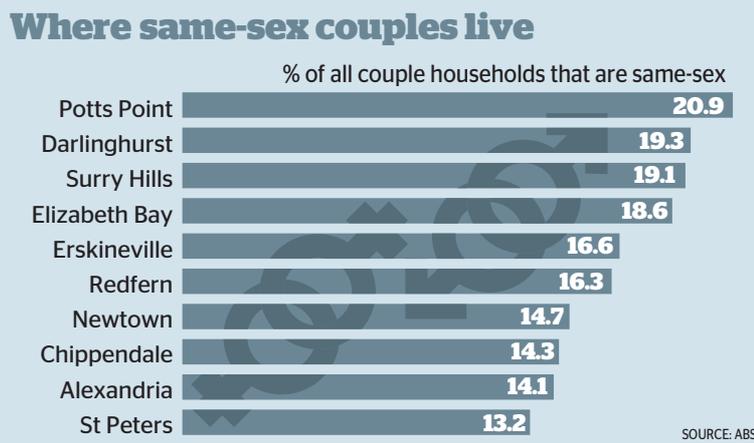
He found a "lack of visibility of gay people living normal lives" in outer-city areas resulted in an absence of understanding from the wider community. There tended to be a pre-occupation with the inner-city gay culture of east coast Australia, he said, rather than a focus on gay and lesbian people living "everyday lives".

The 2011 census was the first time same-sex couples living under the same roof could identify as husbands or wives, although less than 4 per cent did so; most referred to themselves as being in a de facto relationship.

When the next census comes out, Ms Di Stefano said she and Ms Harris will identify as a same-sex couple: "We are having a 'wedding' next October," she said. "It's not legal. We're not going to hold our breath any more."



Suburb-by-suburb interactive graphic.



**Happy together:
Amanda Harris and Karen Di Stefano.**

Photo: James Alcock.