

County among gayest spots in the U.S.

Santa Cruz area has third highest concentration of same-sex couples

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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz has always been thought of as gay-friendly, which was demonstrated by last weekend's high-profile same-sex marriage ceremony. Well, the numbers now back that up, too.

"The Gay and Lesbian Atlas," a 232-page book released this week and hailed as the

most comprehensive survey of the nation's gay population, pegs the Santa Cruz-Watsonville area as the third-gayest metropolitan area in the United States.

Santa Cruz County, population 255,602, follows only San Francisco and Santa Rosa in having the greatest concentration of same-sex couples, a bellwether of total gay population size, according to Gay Atlas co-authors Gary Gates and Jason Ost.

While the Santa Cruz area has scored high in other national surveys on gay life — Santa Cruz rates among the top 10 small cities by Web site PlanetOut and UC Santa Cruz is ranked as one the most gay-friendly campuses by the Princeton Review — authors of the Gay Atlas say their survey brings something new to the table: empirical evidence to test prior conjecture.

"There's a huge amount of policy debate

going on now ... on workplace discrimination, gays in the military, adoption policy, same-sex marriage. But there's little science on these subjects," Gates said. He expects the Gay Atlas to add substance to the debates.

Behind the high number of gays in Santa Cruz County, according to the Gay Atlas, is the large concentration of lesbian residents

See GAY on PAGE A5

Gay

Continued from Page A1

in the area. There are nearly twice as many lesbian couples as gay couples living in the county, as tallied in the 2000 U.S. census, the primary source of data in the new book.

The book ranks Santa Cruz County as the second-most highly concentrated area of lesbian couples out of the 331 U.S. metropolitan areas defined by the Census Bureau. Santa Rosa is the most concentrated.

Both Santa Cruz County and Santa Rosa share in a nationwide trend, illuminated in the Gay Atlas, showing populations of lesbian couples living on the outskirts of major urban centers, as compared to gay male couples who tend to live within the urban centers.

Gates attributed this to the higher number of lesbian couples with children than gay male couples and the pursuit of more suburban lifestyles for their families. Gates also pointed out that women generally have lower incomes than men and may choose to avoid more costly inner-city areas.

Bob Correa, executive director of the Santa Cruz Diversity Center, which caters to the local gay community, wasn't surprised by the county's high ranking in the Gay Atlas.

"(Here) we can live in the neighborhoods we want," Correa said, distinguishing Santa Cruz County from larger cities where gay populations, often feeling uncomfortable in their surroundings, tend to gravitate toward certain neighborhoods — like the Castro in San Francisco or Lavender Hill in Sacramento.

"We don't have to live in a particular place," he said. "It's clearly because of social acceptance in this community, not just tolerance, but acceptance."

The Gay Atlas cites 979 gay couples countywide. Its authors, though, note that the true number of gay couples is

actually much higher — due to reporting limitations in the 2000 census as well as hesitation on the part of some couples to report their sexual orientation.

Within the county, the Westside of Santa Cruz has the largest concentration of gay couples, but smaller pockets of the county like the Seabright neighborhood also have significant numbers, according to Correa.

The data used to measure gay populations, like in the Gay Atlas, commonly comes from counts of gay couples, not total counts of individual gays; this is because the 2000 census doesn't ask individuals for their sexual orientation, only how they relate to fellow members of their households.

Andrew Ruppenstein, a demographer with the state Department of Finance, said most of the data in the Gay Atlas, which covers the state level down to the neighborhood level, has been tracked before. But having it consolidated, he said, could serve policymakers.

"You can better target services to groups," he said.

In particular, Ruppenstein said, regions that have larger gay populations than might be expected stand to benefit.

Some of the surprises, according to Gay Atlas authors, include Houston, which contains one of the 10 gayest neighborhoods in the country, and Alaska and New Mexico, which have relatively high concentrations of gay and lesbian couples in their senior populations.

The neighboring Monterey-Salinas region ranked 23rd among the most gay-concentrated regions in the nation, and San Jose ranked 36th.

The Gay Atlas is published by the Washington-based Urban Institute, a non-partisan research group. The book is currently available for purchase on the group's Web site, www.urban.org/pubs/gayatlas/, and is expected to hit bookstores soon.

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