

# The American Jewish Elderly in Transition\*

IRA ROSENWAIKE

*Graduate School of Social Work, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*

*Recently published figures report the elderly, as a proportion of the total American Jewish population, increased from 12 percent in 1970 to 15.5 percent by 1980. The total Jewish population increased very slightly in number; thus, the growth of the elderly during the decade was at least 29 percent.*

JEWISH AMERICANS are increasingly recognized as an aging population. In 1980 the elderly (65 years and over) were estimated at 15.5 percent of the total Jewish American population<sup>1</sup> compared with only 11.3 percent of the total U.S. population and 12.2 percent for all whites.<sup>2</sup> This difference is largely due to a low level of fertility among Jewish women. According to a definitive study by Della Pergola, Jewish women, for at least the past four decades, have borne fewer children on the average than have other American women.<sup>3</sup> The age structure associated with low fertility has relatively few persons at the younger ages and relatively more at older ages.

Despite the growing awareness of the increase in the number of Jewish elderly, few researchers have examined the changing living conditions of this population. Studies by Goldstein,<sup>4</sup> Huberman<sup>5</sup> and Kahana and Kahana<sup>6</sup> are notable exceptions. This neglect certainly derives in part from a paucity of data. American Jews are not identified in the U.S. census since there is no query on religion. Furthermore, although the 1980 census was the first to ask a large sample of individuals to identify their ancestry or ethnicity, "entries of religious groups were not coded separately."<sup>7</sup>

Due to the lack of national data on the American Jewish population, the Coun-

cil of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds sponsored the National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) in 1970-71. A large sample of about 7,000 Jewish households was interviewed in order to secure information on the characteristics of the national community. From this survey, Goldstein<sup>8</sup> generated data on lifetime migration by age which indicate that the Jewish aged of the future would differ markedly from those of 1970-71. A sizable majority (62 percent) of the sample who were 65 years-and-over were born outside the United States (excluding persons of unknown birthplace). In very sharp contrast, only 20 percent of those in the next oldest age category (50-64 years) were foreign born. Thus, it was evident that within a short time, the elderly would become a predominantly American-born population as members of this younger group aged and moved into the 65-and-over group. Moreover, many of the characteristic features of the Jewish aged (of 1970) were likely to change within as little as a decade.

## Data and Methods

Following the 1970 census a number of investigators, who wanted to examine certain aspects of the social and economic characteristics of American Jews, used as a proxy the census query on mother tongue given to 15 percent of households.<sup>9</sup> Respondents who reported Yiddish were all presumed to be nearly exclusively Jewish. A similar ap-

\* This research was supported in part by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

proach cannot be used with the 1980 census data since the mother tongue query was omitted. However, the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted in November 1979 by the Bureau of the Census did include such a question for persons aged 14 years-old-and-over. Mother tongue was defined as the language other than English "spoken at home when the person was a child. An individual can have a non-English mother tongue without ever having been able to speak that language."<sup>10</sup>

The CPS sample consisted of approximately 54,000 households in which interviews were obtained. The weighted sample results were inflated to independent estimates of the total civilian non-institutional population of the United States by age, race, and sex. The weighted results indicate that about 1.2 million persons 14 years-old-and-over reported Yiddish as their mother tongue. Significantly, more than 40 percent of these individuals were at least 65 years-of-age.<sup>11</sup>

It is apparent that the language question identifies only a minority of adult Jews. The restriction in the present study of Yiddish mother tongue data to those 65 years-and-over, however, increases the extent of coverage (and reduces the extent of error) very considerably. Kobrin used data from the 1970-1971 NJPS in an effort to determine the degree of bias resulting from the use of census mother tongue statistics. She found that among persons surveyed more than half of those aged 50 to 64 years were Yiddish speakers (58.3 percent), as were nearly three-fourths of those aged 65 and older (72.6 percent). By generation 64 percent of the foreign born and 55 percent of the native born of foreign parents (of all ages) were Yiddish speakers. However, only eight percent of the members of the third generation indicated a knowledge of

Yiddish.<sup>12</sup> Clearly the Yiddish mother tongue population differs from the aggregate U.S. Jewish population in its preponderance of elderly and first- and second-generation Americans. But Kobrin's data also indicate that, even allowing for population aging between 1970-71 and 1979, a substantial majority of the American Jewish population 65 years and over in 1979 were likely to report Yiddish as their mother tongue.

The small sample size of persons reporting Yiddish mother tongue in the 1979 CPS precludes detailed analyses. This paper, therefore, follows the Census Bureau practice of showing summary measures (such as percent distributions) only when the base of the measure is 75,000 or greater: "Because of the large standard errors involved, there is little chance that summary measures would reveal useful information when computed on a smaller base."<sup>13</sup>

Since published statistics by mother tongue from the November 1979 CPS were minimal, machine-readable data which contained the Census Bureau records for this survey were acquired. Two subfiles were created from these records. The first consisted of 733 records (before weighting) of all individuals reporting Yiddish to be their mother tongue. The second subfile consisted of 1,325 records (before weighting) of all persons living in those households where at least one individual reported Yiddish as his or her mother tongue.

### Findings

The weighted count of persons 65 years-and-over reporting Yiddish mother tongue came to 469,000. The combined group represented by persons of Yiddish mother tongue and non-Yiddish mother tongue persons 65 years-of-age-and-over residing in the same household came to 558,000. Since intermarriage among elderly Jews was in-

significant,<sup>14</sup> it is likely that nearly all of the latter group can be considered as Jewish. For convenience in terminology the aggregate household population will be designated as the Yiddish language group.

*Nativity Distribution*

As anticipated from the NJPS data, aged persons of Yiddish language in 1979 differ in their nativity distribution from the group aged 65 years-and-over in 1970-71. In 1979 some 62 percent of those 65 and over in the Yiddish language group were native born.

Table 1 indicates that more than seven tenths of the "young" old (those 65-74 years) were of native birth. Only among persons 75 years and above were more than one-half of foreign birth. This distribution reflects the immigration patterns of the past: Jewish immi-

gration to the United States was at its peak prior to World War I; legal restrictions in the early 1920s reduced the flow from Eastern Europe to a trickle.<sup>15</sup>

Although a majority of the elderly Yiddish language group were native born very few had native parents. Almost all of the U.S. born were second-generation Americans, mainly the children of East European immigrants. Table 1 indicates that the fathers of a majority of the Yiddish language group were born in Russia. About one-fourth had fathers reported as born in Poland or Austria. Only three percent of the Yiddish language group had fathers born in the U.S.

In the total U.S. population 65-and-over women outnumber men 3 to 2, reflecting the lower life expectancy of men than of women. Table 1 indicates a somewhat similar distribution of males and females among the Yiddish language group.

**Table 1**  
**Selected Characteristics of Persons 65**  
**Years-and-Over of Yiddish Language:**  
**November 1979**

(Numbers in thousands.  
Noninstitutional population only)

Characteristics	65-74 75 years		
	Total years and over		
<b>NATIVITY</b>			
Total	558	352	206
Native born	348	250	98
Foreign born	210	102	108
Percent native born	62	71	48
Percent foreign born	38	29	52
<b>FATHER'S BIRTHPLACE</b>			
U.S.S.R.	309	197	112
Poland	93	57	36
Austria	48	31	17
Other foreign	93	57	36
United States	15	10	5
Percent U.S.S.R.	56	56	55
Percent Poland	17	16	18
Percent Austria	8	9	8
Percent other foreign	17	16	18
Percent United States	3	3	2
<b>SEX</b>			
Male	230	147	83
Female	328	205	113
Percent male	41	42	40
Percent female	59	58	60

*Education*

Although the November 1979 CPS indicated that more than two thirds of the adults in the U.S. population were high school graduates, there was considerable variation by age. The percent who did not complete high school increases with age; the elderly therefore, had the lowest proportion. Among the elderly of Yiddish mother tongue, as among the U.S. population as a whole, the foreign born were less likely to have completed high school than the native born.

Table 2 indicates that approximately one third of those of Yiddish mother tongue aged 75 years and older were high school graduates, while two thirds of those aged 65-74 years had completed high school. Within each age category, the percentage of those who were high school graduates or who had attended at least one year of college was

**Table 2**  
**Educational Characteristics of Persons 65 Years-and-Over of Yiddish Mother Tongue and of Total U.S. Population: November 1979**  
 (Numbers in thousands. Noninstitutional population only)

Population Group	Total	65-74 years	75 years and over
<b>YIDDISH MOTHER TONGUE:</b>			
Total	469	295	174
Percent high school graduates	53.1	65.1	32.9
Percent 1 or more years college	18.9	22.6	13.3
Native born	279	202	77
Percent high school graduates	64.5	71.7	43.6
Percent 1 or more years college	25.8	27.3	20.5
Foreign born	190	93	97
Percent high school graduates	36.3	48.9	24.7
Percent 1 or more years college	8.4	10.6	7.2
<b>U.S. POPULATION</b>			
Total	23,572	15,053	8,519
Percent high school graduates	41.7	54.9	34.3
Percent 1 or more years college	17.8	18.9	15.8

greater for the native born than for the foreign born. Among the aggregate aged of Yiddish mother tongue those of native birth were about three times as likely to have attended college as those born abroad.

Comparison of the Yiddish mother tongue group with the total U.S. population reveals an interesting development as the Jewish elderly shifted from a largely foreign born contingent to a predominately native group. Table 2 indicates that the proportions for those who completed high school or who attended college are slightly smaller for the Yiddish mother tongue group 75 years and older than for the U.S. population as a whole. On the other hand, the 65-74 year old age group, the first to be dominated by persons of native birth, had relatively high proportions completing high school (65 percent compared with the national average of 46 percent) and attending college (23 percent compared with the national average of 19 percent).

#### *Residence*

The Jewish population is markedly more concentrated in metropolitan

areas, particularly in a few of the largest areas, than is the total population of the United States. The 1979 survey indicated 97 percent of the elderly Yiddish language group resided in metropolitan areas (Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas). A majority (53 percent) resided in the four largest metropolitan areas (the central cities and suburban rings) as defined by the 1970 census: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia. By contrast, of the total U.S. population 65 years-and-over, 60 percent resided in metropolitan areas and only 12 percent lived in the four largest. More than half (53 percent) of the Yiddish language group 65 years-and-over resided in the central cities of all of the nation's metropolitan areas; among the total U.S. population, 65 years-and-over, 29 percent were in central cities. More than one third of the elderly Yiddish language group lived in a single metropolitan complex—New York City and its suburbs (including Nassau and Suffolk counties).

#### *Marital Status*

In the U.S. elderly population as a whole, a much higher proportion of

males than females are married and living with their spouses (75 percent compared with 37 percent in 1979) and a substantially higher proportion of females than males are widowed or divorced (55 percent versus 18 percent in 1979).<sup>16</sup> These differences are due mainly to the higher mortality of males than females but also to the tendency of men to marry women a few years younger than themselves. Another factor contributing to the differences is the very much higher remarriage rate of widowers than widows.

The distribution of elderly persons in the Yiddish language group by marital status does not differ greatly from that of all elderly persons. However, more elderly Jewish males and females are married and living with a spouse (81 percent and 45 percent respectively) than in the general population and somewhat fewer are widowed or divorced (see Table 3). This may reflect lower mortality rates at younger ages relative to the non-Jewish population.

Marital status is a primary determinant of the living arrangements of elderly men and women. Since men 65 years-and-over are much more likely to be married than are women, they are more likely to live in families. The proportion of (noninstitutionalized) men in the elderly Yiddish language group who lived in families was 86.5 percent, compared with 59.5 percent among women. The living arrangements of Jewish elderly, too, closely resemble those of the non-Jewish population. Some 17.4 percent of all men 65-and-over and 41.7 percent of women resided in nonfamily households (usually living alone) among the total U.S. population. About four percent of males and six percent of females in the total U.S. population 65 years-and-over enumerated in the 1980 census were living in institutions.<sup>17</sup>

The CPS provides data only on the noninstitutional population and there-

**Table 3**  
**Marital Status of Persons 65**  
**Years-and-Over of Yiddish Language**  
**Group and of Total U.S. Population:**  
**November 1979**  
**(Percent distribution. Noninstitutional**  
**population only)**

Marital Status and Population Group	Total	Male	Female
<b>YIDDISH LANGUAGE GROUP</b>			
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Percent:			
Married	61.5	82.8	46.5
Spouse present	59.9	80.6	45.3
Spouse absent	1.6	2.2	1.2
Widowed/divorced	32.6	10.3	48.3
Never married	5.9	6.9	5.2
<b>U.S. POPULATION</b>			
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Percent			
Married	54.4	77.1	38.5
Spouse present	52.4	74.6	36.9
Spouse absent	2.0	2.6	1.6
Widowed/divorced	39.8	17.5	55.5
Never married	5.8	5.4	6.1

fore sheds no light on the characteristics of those who are institutionalized. However, data from the Survey of Institutional Persons (SIP), conducted by the Bureau of the Census in 1976, provide information on numerous characteristics of the population in long-term care institutions, including religion. Of almost 1.2 million residents of nursing homes, the overwhelming majority were 65 years-and-over; 49,500, or 4.2 percent were estimated as Jewish.<sup>18</sup>

Another tabulation indicated that the number of Jews aged 65-and-over in all categories of long-term-care institutions was 40,900. However, for an additional 8,000 Jews in these institutions, age was not reported. In the total long-term care institutional population about seven-eighths of those with age not reported were in nursing homes and presumably at least 65 years of age. It seems reasonable to surmise this situation applied to the Jewish population with age not reported also. If this is the case, then approximately 48,000 Jews

age 65 and over were in long-term care institutions. Given the increase in number of both the Jewish aged and the institutionalized elderly, a figure of about 55,000 would seem probable by 1979.

*Participation in Labor Force and Income Levels*

Labor force participation rates decline swiftly by age among older adults. In 1979, the percentage of all men 65 years-and-over who were employed or looking for work was 20 percent; for women the rate was only 8 percent.<sup>19</sup> Higher percentages of elderly Yiddish language group males and females, 26 percent and 9 percent respectively, were in the labor force (Table 4). This may reflect higher levels of self-employment among Jews than among the general population. Of the elderly in the Yiddish language group who are in the labor force, more than one-half of the men and three-fourths of the women work part time rather than full time.

Income among the elderly usually declines when part-time employment or

retirement replaces full time work. Nationally, the median income in 1978 for families with household heads 65 years-and-over was \$10,141, a little more than half the median income (\$19,330) for families headed by persons 55 to 64 years of age.<sup>20</sup> Elderly American Jews in 1979, unlike their counterparts in earlier decades (as represented by the characteristics of those 75 years and over) had higher educational attainment than the elderly in general. Moreover, since a higher percentage of Jews than of non-Jews seem to have remained in the labor force after age 65, it is not unexpected that the median income of the elderly Jewish population is higher than that of the aggregate population.

Among families headed by a person 65 years-or-over of Yiddish mother tongue the median income was \$13,000. Approximately nine-tenths of these families were headed by a male. As discussed previously, a large number of elderly women, Jewish and non-Jewish, live alone. Sex is a significant factor which affects income level since income tends to be lower for women than for men. Among Yiddish mother tongue women, aged 65-and-over, heading households in which no relatives were present, the median income was about \$4,400.

**Table 4**  
**Labor Force Participation of Persons 65 Years-and-Over in Yiddish Language Group, by Sex: November 1979**

(Numbers in thousands.  
Noninstitutional population only)

Sex and labor force participation	Total	65-74 years	75 years and over
<b>Males</b>			
Number	230	147	83
Percent in labor force	26	34	11
Percent not in labor force	74	66	89
<b>Females</b>			
Number	328	205	123
Percent in labor force	9	14	1
Percent not in labor force	91	86	99

*Home Ownership and Rentals*

The elderly, in common with younger families, spent the largest share of their income on housing. Overall among all elderly in the United States in 1979, 76 percent lived in houses that were owned—with or without mortgages—and 24 percent were renters. For those in the Yiddish language group who were 65 years and over, the pattern of ownership was quite different: 47 percent were homeowners and 53 percent were renters. This lower rate of home

ownership among elderly Jews reflects, in part, their concentration in metropolitan areas, especially in central cities. In contrast, 63 percent of the general population 65 years and over, even among those in central cities, were homeowners.

The significantly below-average rate of home ownership by elderly Jews is also due to the unusually low level of ownership among the first generation population. Among the foreign-born elderly of Yiddish mother tongue, 67 percent lived in rented dwelling places in 1979. On the other hand, among those of native birth only 47 percent were renters. Even this figure, however, is approximately twice that among all persons 65 years-and-over.

Raw figures for home ownership and rentals do not indicate the quality of housing. Studies have shown that one-third of older owner-occupants lived in their current residence for 25 or more years. Among elderly renters, only one-tenth had lived in their residences for a comparable period. The homes of elderly owners are larger (and thus more in need of maintenance), less well insulated and older than those of elderly renters.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Other Social Data*

A recent study of the Jewish elderly population points out that its increasing size is leading to greater visibility as well as to increasing demands for services.<sup>22</sup> This is apparent in studies of the Jewish elderly based on data from community surveys conducted in metropolitan areas such as Seattle, Cleveland, Birmingham, Los Angeles and Chicago, among others. Generally, these studies have been based on sub-samples of a sample survey and involve relatively small numbers.

Due to sampling variation, results can vary extensively. Thus, a report of the

Jewish elderly (65 years-and-over) based on a sample taken in 1979 in metropolitan Los Angeles, indicated 66 percent were women and only 39 percent were married.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, a 1981 metropolitan Chicago study reported that of elderly Jews 65 years-and-over, 52 percent were women and 62 percent were married. The latter study also found that 23 percent of the elderly had no living children and that an additional 12 percent had no children residing in the Chicago area.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that two out of three had one or more children living in the same metropolitan area. Among the large number of elderly who have migrated to retirement communities in the South, especially Florida, in recent years, it is likely that only a small minority have children living in the same metropolitan region.

Relatively few studies have looked at the health status of the elderly Jewish population. Recent research in a large suburb of Detroit compared elderly Jews and non-Jews according to selected measures of health. The percentage of males with heart trouble and diabetes was significantly higher for Jewish males than for non-Jewish males. The only significantly higher percentage of a major health problem among Jewish as compared with non-Jewish women was found in the incidence of asthma. However, Jewish women reported a greater number of health problems than non-Jewish women.<sup>25</sup>

Recently published figures report the elderly, as a proportion of the total American Jewish population, increased from 12.0 per cent in 1970 to 15.5 per cent by 1980.<sup>26</sup> The total Jewish population increased very slightly in number; thus, the growth of the elderly during the decade was at least 29 percent. Schmelz has projected an increase of nine percent in the American Jewish population 65 years-of-age-and-older

between 1980 and 1985, with the absolute numbers increasing from an estimated 880,000 to 960,000.<sup>27</sup> At the same time the total Jewish population (all ages) is projected as increasing by less than one percent.

Excluding an estimated 55,000 elderly Jews in long-term care institutions from a rough approximation of 860,000 Jewish aged in 1979 gives a noninstitutionalized figure of 805,000. The data presented in this paper from the 1979 CPS account for 558,000 noninstitutionalized Yiddish language persons 65 years-and-over. This would indicate coverage of almost 70 percent through use of the mother tongue item. However, despite the utility of the variable, it is clear that within a short span of years, the mother tongue of the majority of Jewish elderly will be English, not Yiddish. Alternative means, therefore, are required for any future study of the dynamic features of the American Jewish aged at the national level.

### References

1. U. O. Schmelz and S. Della Pergola, "The Demographic Consequences of U.S. Jewish Population Trends," in: *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 83. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983.
2. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population, General Population Characteristics: United States Summary*. Vol. PC 80-1-B1. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983.
3. S. Della Pergola, "Patterns of American Jewish Fertility," *Demography*, 1980, 17, 261-73.
4. S. Goldstein, "Jews in the United States: Perspective from Demography," in: J. B. Gittler (ed.), *Jewish Life in the United States: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*. New York: New York University Press, 1981.
5. S. Huberman, "Growing Old in Jewish America: A Study of Jewish Aged in Los Angeles," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 1984, 60, 314-23.
6. E. Kahana and B. Kahana, "Jews," in E. B. Palmore, (ed.), *Handbook on the Aged in the United States*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1984.
7. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics: United States Summary*. Vol. PC 80-1-C1. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983.
8. S. Goldstein, "Population Movement and Redistribution Among American Jews," in U. O. Schmelz, P. Glickson and S. Della Pergola (eds.), *Papers in Jewish Demography: 1981*. Jerusalem: Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 1983.
9. See for example: B. R. Chiswick, "The Earnings and Human Capital of American Jews," *The Journal of Human Resources*, 1983, 18:313-336, and F. E. Kobrin, "Family Patterns Among the Yiddish Mother Tongue Subpopulation: U.S. 1970." Paper presented at a conference on "The Evolving Jewish Family," Queens College, New York, 1981.
10. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 116, *Ancestry and Language in the United States: November 1979*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982.
11. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Ibid.*, p. 14.
12. F. E. Kobrin, "National Data on American Jewry, 1970-71: A Comparative Evaluation of the Census Yiddish Mother Tongue Subpopulation and the National Jewish Population Survey," in U. O. Schmelz, P. Glickson and S. Della Pergola, (eds.), *op. cit.*
13. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Series P-23, No. 116, *op. cit.*, p. 22. Standard error tables are given on pp. 22-23.
14. Schmelz and Della Pergola, *op. cit.*
15. S. Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the United States: Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History*, 1975 9:35-124.
16. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 349, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1979*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980.
17. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population, Detailed Population Characteristics, United States Summary* Vol. PC 80-1-D1-A. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984.
18. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 69, *1976 Survey of Institutionalized Persons*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978.
19. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-23, *Social and Economic Characteristics of Americans During Midlife*, No. 111. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981, p. 8.



## JOURNAL OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

20. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Series P-23, No. 111, *Ibid.*, p. 40.
21. B. J. Soldo, "America's Elderly in the 1980s." *Population Bulletin*. Vol. 35, No. 4. Washington: Population Reference Bureau, 1980.
22. Kahana and Kahana, *op. cit.*
23. Huberman, *op. cit.*
24. Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. "Demographics of Elderly Jews in Chicago Metropolitan Area." Unpublished paper prepared by the Council for Jewish Elderly, 1984.
25. M. Julius, V. M. Hawthorne, E. Johnson, P. Rust and P. Carpentier-Alting, "Gender and Ethnic Differences in Health of Southfield Elderly." Paper presented at annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Antonio, 1984.
26. Schmelz and Della Pergola, *op. cit.*
27. U. O. Schmelz, *Aging of World Jewry*. Jerusalem: The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University, 1984.

The author wishes to thank Lawrence E. Marks for providing this paper.