

INTERMARRIAGE AMONG JEWISH AUSTRALIANS

By Dr. Gary Eckstein

Background¹

The history of Australian Jewry begins with the arrival of the first British convict settlement in 1788. Among those first convicts were at least eight Jews. Every succeeding convict shipment included Jews until convict transportation ceased in the middle of the nineteenth century. Australia is believed to be the only European settlement where Jews were present from the very beginning.

Most Jewish settlers to Australia until well into the twentieth century came from Britain, although some German and Eastern European immigrants also arrived in Australia following the discovery of the goldfields and the intensification of anti-Semitism in their home countries. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of Jewish Australians had been born in Australia and had formed a progressive and assimilated community within the broad stream of Australian life.

The problem of intermarriage was raised as early as 1920 when it was observed that despite continuing if limited immigration, the population appeared to be experiencing only marginal growth while the Australian population as a whole was enjoying a period of robust expansion. The 1933 census indicated that Jews comprised 0.36% of the population, the lowest proportion of population recorded before or since. The actual number then recorded was 23,553 although there would almost certainly have

¹ Much of this section is taken from the work of Dr. Suzanne Rutland of the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney, and her book *Edge of the Diaspora: Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, Collins Australia, Sydney 1988; Brandl and Schlesinger, New York 1997.

been an element of underenumeration. In 2001, Jews comprised 0.42% of population on official returns and 0.53% by our unofficial estimates.

The persecution of European Jewry put a sudden end to the comfortable and assimilated lifestyle of the Australian Jewish community. While Australia experienced little direct anti-Semitism, immigration quotas were enforced limiting the number of arrivals especially before the outbreak of war. After the full extent of the Holocaust had been learned, there was some (but not full) relaxation of quotas affecting both the surviving Jews of Europe and the community that had found some respite in Japanese occupied Shanghai.

The demographic ramification of the Holocaust on Australian Jewry was profound. The population more than doubled between 1933 and 1961 with a further influx from Hungary escaping Soviet occupation. A second consequence was to differentiate the Jewish communities of Sydney and Melbourne, the two main centres of Australian Jewry. The Melbourne community was of predominant Eastern European origin while Sydney received a much larger influx of the more assimilated Jews from Central Europe.

Most practicing Australian Jews belong to Modern Orthodox congregations. There are also two Reform temples in both Sydney and Melbourne and another in Perth. In contrast with the United States, there are no organized congregations of Conservative Judaism although some Reform ministers have introduced alternate Conservative services. The Lubavich movement is active in the larger communities offering *yeshivot* and day schools for adherents. Reform conversions to Judaism are generally unacceptable

to Orthodox congregations, which has important ramifications for the children whose mothers converted in a Reform ceremony.

Recent Demography of Australian Jewry

The growth of the Australian Jewish community since World War II can be divided into three phases. The large scale immigration by survivors of the Holocaust was followed by a period of consolidation with a considerable level of family formation continuing until about 1960. Between 1960 and 1980, there was little growth as migration fell away and most of the family formation had been completed. Since that time a more complex pattern has emerged. Ageing of the original migrants has led to an excess of deaths over births but new migrant streams have emerged, especially from South Africa and for a period from the former USSR.

Australia is fortunate in holding good, if underenumerated, data on its Jewish communities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducts a population census every five years and the responses to all questions are tabulated without sampling. A standard question at the census, unchanged since the federation of Australia, requires respondents to state their religious affiliation. The number and characteristics of Australian Jews are based on that question, after accounting for underenumeration as discussed later in this paper.

In June 1981, the Jewish population of Australia was estimated at 74,500² after relatively modest growth over the preceding decade. Renewed immigration especially from South Africa led to a marked rise in the population growth rate. The Jewish population rose solidly to 82,900 in 1986 followed by further increases in later years

² After adjusting for underenumeration

offset to some degree by an increasing negative differential between births and deaths. The population reached 89,000 in June 1991 and by June 1996, another strong rise fuelled entirely by immigration from the former Soviet Union as well as South Africa lifted the estimated population to 95,800. The overall growth rate during the 15 years from 1981 to 1996 was 1.68% per annum, considerably above that of the general population. Sydney (1.75%) grew at a faster rate than Melbourne (1.21%) while both were easily outpaced by a 3.24% per annum growth elsewhere in Australia. This sharp growth rate can be attributed to strong South African immigration to Perth and retirement movement to the Queensland coast, which has certain similarities to Florida in terms of climactic and lifestyle attraction for retirees.

Between 1996 and 2001, community growth slowed as immigration from the former Soviet Union disappeared and deaths exceeded births by a substantial margin. Immigration from South Africa continued at record levels. The population growth rate was 1.02% p.a., similar to that of the population as a whole. The Jewish population of Australia at 30 June 2001 was estimated at 100,800 based on a flat underenumeration factor of 20%. Demographers who prefer 25% would estimate a population of 105,000.

The Australian Jewish population is concentrated in its two largest cities of Melbourne (46%) and Sydney (41%). By comparison, these two cities' share of the overall population is 18% and 21% respectively. The rest of Australia including the smaller capital cities, regional, and rural communities comprises 61% of the total population but only 13% of Australian Jewry. Many of these Jews live in the isolated city of Perth in Western Australia, 3,000km from Sydney and Melbourne (somewhat analogous to the Canadian Jewish community of Vancouver relative to that of Toronto

and Montreal). For the purposes of this paper, we have subdivided the Jewish population into Melbourne, Sydney, and the balance of Australia.

Within the cities of Melbourne and Sydney, the Jewish community is very concentrated. Most Jews live in affluent circumstances close to Sydney Harbour or in the prestigious suburbs of South Eastern Melbourne. In these suburbs are found most of the community infrastructure including the synagogues, day schools and communal organizations. In both cities, about 25% of the Jewish community live elsewhere and often, because of the sprawl of Australian cities, at a considerable distance from communal networks. There are financial barriers to housing in the prime Jewish areas.

Prospects for future growth remain dependent upon immigration for at least another decade during which deaths will continue to exceed births. The Australian Jewish community is considerably older than the population as a whole with many of the Holocaust era survivors now at advanced ages and needing support from the community. The pool of South African immigrants is not sustainable for very much longer especially if the Australian government continues to place restrictions on older persons wishing to migrate for family reunion. I would expect a more modest growth pattern until the age distribution becomes more stable.

Underenumeration

The definition of “Jewish” for this report is based on self-identification. This approach is consistent with that used by the Australian Statistician—the representative of Australia’s National Statistical Service—and most other central statistical agencies throughout the world. Rabbinical authorities would define a Jew according to *halacha* and a larger population would be the probable result. Some social researchers prefer a

definition based on Jewish origins, a definition that would also result in much larger numbers. For the planning of Jewish services and to report on intermarriage, it has been considered prudent to restrict the potential client base to people who regard themselves as Jewish.

An estimate of 20–25% has been accepted as a constant underenumeration factor in previous years. I usually prefer 20% while my Melbourne colleague, Professor John Goldlust, prefers 25%. In 1996, very good statistics for Sydney were also gathered from schools and from the Board of Jewish Education. It was then found that underenumeration was considerably higher for younger age children than those with longer experience at school. This finding is consistent with the unusual age distribution observable on a population pyramid of Jewish children. It appears that some younger parents, who continued to remain outside Judaism while their children were of preschool age, are prepared to renominate in later years. This seems to be especially true of those who decide to enroll their children at a Jewish day school. A similar study was conducted after the 2001 census with broadly similar findings albeit at a slightly lower level of underenumeration.

Some Jews consistently decide to omit reference to Judaism on their census return. There may be a number of reasons for reluctance to disclose their Jewish religious denomination. These may include fear of anti-Semitism, distrust of government agencies, unwillingness to divulge personal details and knowledge that religion is regarded as an optional question by the Australian Statistician. Furthermore, there are members of the community who regard themselves as Jewish without any adherence to Judaism as a religion. These people may take the census question to imply observance of

Jewish religious practices and are then unable, rather than unwilling, to disclose their Jewish identity elsewhere on the form.

It is possible, indeed likely, that certain sections of the community underenumerate to a greater degree than other sections. However, it is difficult to determine the identity of these groups. Prevailing wisdom inferred that older people, and especially Holocaust survivors, were more likely to underenumerate. The evidence suggests the opposite. The large influx of recent migrants from South Africa may also have higher levels of underenumeration if census results are compared to communal information sources. However, firm statistics would be needed to support the use of different underenumeration factors for subgroups within the community. I have continued to use a global underenumeration factor for the entire Jewish community

Ethnic Migration

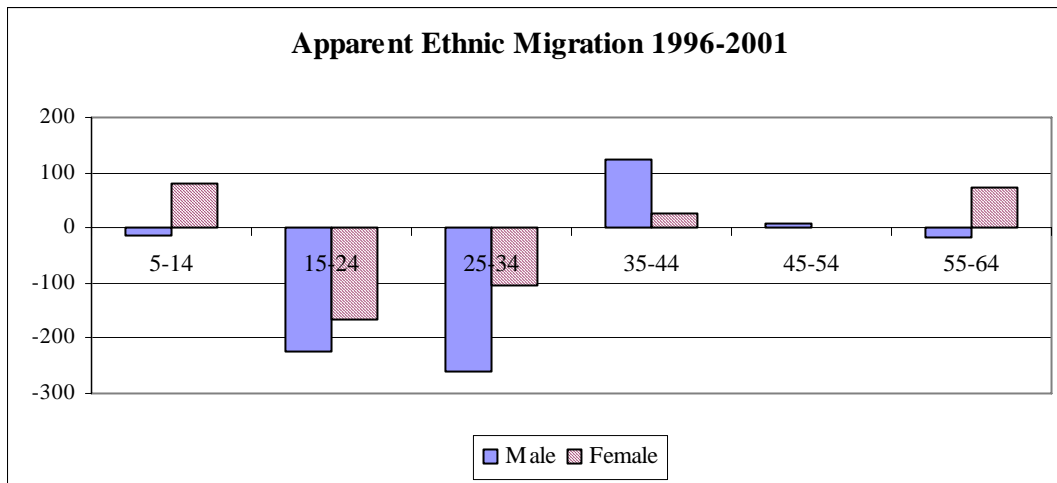
It is apparent that some people alter their response to questions about ethnicity and religion from one census to the next. Demographers refer to this trend as 'ethnic migration'. In the case of the Australian indigenous population, a lively debate has ensued over possible reasons for this action. Similarly, Jewish cohorts vary over time to a degree that cannot be explained by migration or mortality effects. The Rabbinical approach would hold that a person is either Jewish or not Jewish and cannot change one's mind about their religious status. One could speculate that circumstances and beliefs alter over time and people feel that they have left or returned to the fold. However, clearly intermarriage would be an important contributing factor. Calculation of ethnic migration numbers requires good and consistent population data over two census years. Unfortunately, we only have estimates for Sydney, due to a change in the methodology

adopted by Melbourne demographers in adjusting for underenumeration and emigrants other than to Israel.

For Sydney, the 2001 census was compared to the 1996 census according to the age and sex of the respondent in 1996. Migrants who came to Australia during this period were omitted and allowances were made for death, emigration and movement between the States. Figure 1 shows the apparent ethnic migration pattern from 1996 to 2001 indicating that most movement occurs in young adult ages with some return in the family formation years.

If the experience in Melbourne and the balance of Australia was similar to that identified for Sydney, the Australian Jewish community would have lost between 1,200 and 1,500 people over the five year intercensal period, corresponding to around 1.4% of the population.

Figure 1



Intermarriage Statistics

Although ethnic migration may be caused by intermarriage or lead an individual to be more likely to intermarry, we have no statistics on the numbers of former Jews who

have renounced their previous religious affiliation. They and their children represent the primary differential between those population researchers who favour a wider or narrower definition of who is Jewish. While we can only speculate about the specific level of intermarriage among ethnic migrants, we have reliable data on those who have intermarried but retained their religious affiliation.

Census results indicate that there is an apparent increase in the proportion of marriages where one partner is Jewish but the other responds with another religion or does not answer the question. It is difficult to make assumptions about underenumeration in circumstances of mixed marriage. Since it is likely that the partners complete the form jointly, one could argue that a mixed response indicates genuine differences in religion. However, it is also possible that both partners are Jewish but one feels more strongly about their religious affiliation than does the other. I have chosen to report data on intermarriage without making adjustments for underenumeration between the partners.

Intermarriage rates may be calculated in two ways: by the number of families and by the number of individuals involved. The proportion of intermarried will be different depending on which approach one uses. For instance, the number of mixed marriages in the 25–29 year-old age group was reported at close to be 40%. Two out of five marriages involving a Jewish respondent had non-Jewish partners. However, since both partners in endogamous marriages are counted within the Jewish community, the number of people with a non-Jewish partner is not 40% but 26.6%. The discussion below is reported in terms of individuals in the calculation of intermarriage rates and in terms of marriages for calculation involving children.

The data used for analysis comprises all women aged from 15–59 living in a married or *de facto* status where either the woman or her partner noted her or his religion as Jewish. Gay partnerships are not recognized as marriages by the Australian Statistician. If there was more than one dependent child living at home, the religion of the youngest child was taken as a surrogate for the religion of all dependent children. We did not collect data for women over the age of 60 since there would be very few with dependent children and intermarriage rates reflected a very different environment at the time of marriage. For similar reasons, I reported data for women aged between 15 and 39 in five year age bands but used a single aggregate for women aged 40–59.

Intermarriage for Individuals

The 2001 census reported 18,528 Australian women who met the criteria set out above. After subtracting 387 women whose partner was not at home for the census, there remain 18,141 women where data are held for both the subject and her partner. Of these women, 14,694 reported themselves as Jewish while 3,447 reported themselves to be of another faith or did not respond. The partners of 11,627 Jewish women were also Jewish giving us an intermarriage rate of 21%. The 18,141 men included in the data reported 15,074 to be Jewish and 3,067 to be of another faith indicating an intermarriage rate for Jewish men of 23%. The total intermarriage rate for the 29,768 Jewish persons applicable to the search used was 22%³.

³ Note that this excludes the effects of ethnic migration

Age

There is a clear reverse relationship between the age of women (and presumably their partners) and the likelihood of intermarriage. There were only 30 women aged 15–19 living with partners and they have been aggregated with the 20–24 age group.

Table 1: Intermarriage Rates by Age of Woman

Age of Woman	Jewish Partner	Other Partner	Intermarriage (%)
15-24	432	247	36.4
25-29	1,972	714	26.6
30-34	2,596	944	26.7
35-39	3,012	993	24.8
40-59	15,222	3,596	19.1

The larger numbers in the older age groups relate more to the age distribution of the Jewish population than to actual age of marriage although it is true that Jews are marrying at slightly higher ages and have slightly lower fertility than the population as a whole. Whether the substantially higher proportion of intermarried at the youngest age group is a true change in propensity to marry out, or rather reflects the actions of persons who marry at younger ages, remains to be seen.

De Facto Relationships

There were 2,108 or 11% of couples living in a *de facto* relationship, about half the proportion found in the Australian population as a whole. The *de facto* population has a much higher rate of intermarriage as might be expected and is also considerably younger than those married. The relatively few *de facto* partnerships at older ages are increasingly likely to be intermarried.

Table 2: De Facto Relationships – Intermarriage Rates by Age of Women

Age of Woman	Jewish Partner	Other Partner	Intermarriage (%)
20-24	128	177	58.0
25-29	330	349	51.4
30-34	110	248	69.3
35-39	80	200	71.4
40-59	204	536	72.4

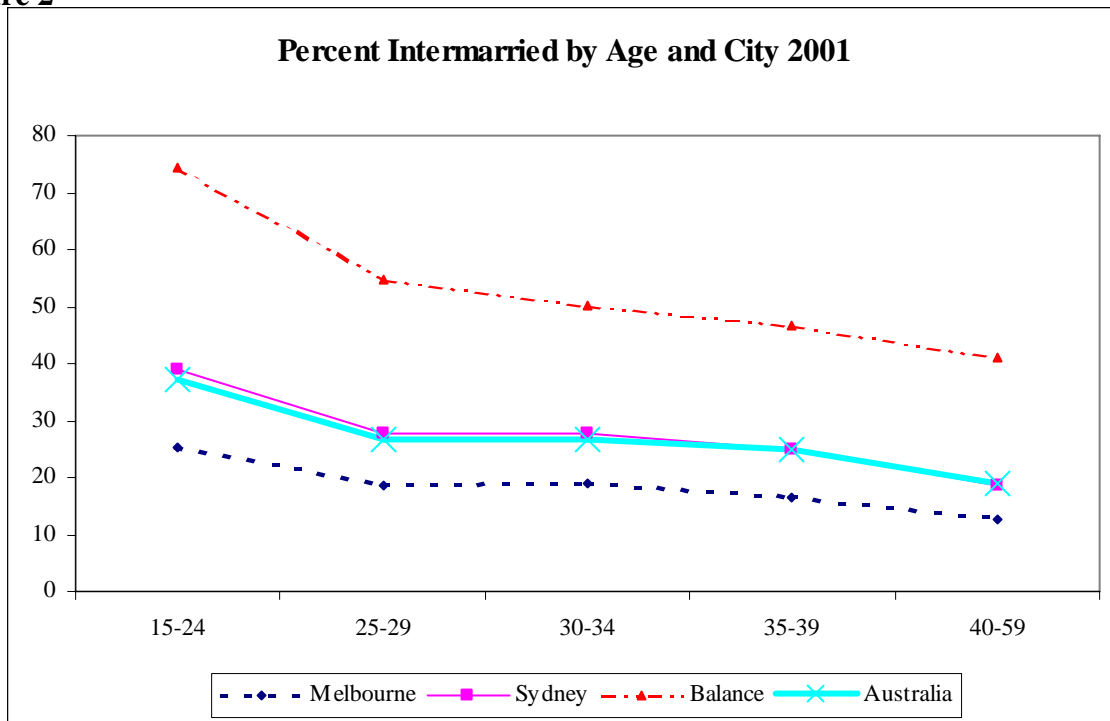
Location

The different composition of the Melbourne and Sydney populations was discussed earlier. The Melbourne community has always been more involved and more supportive of religious and Zionist activities, extending from higher synagogue membership to larger and more widespread contributions to the United Israel Appeal and local charitable fundraising for old age homes and Jewish education. To some extent, this reflects the cities themselves: Sydney has always had a more cosmopolitan, liberal (some would say hedonistic) lifestyle than its southern rival. However, most of the difference can be ascribed to the Eastern European origin of the population in comparison to Sydney, whose Jewish population derives mainly from Central Europe and lately South Africa.

The different compositions can readily be seen when we examine the variation in intermarriage statistics. At all ages, intermarriage is less common in Melbourne (Fig. 2). One might expect the difference to be narrowing at younger ages where in both communities young adults are largely the second generation born in Australia. However, this does not seem to be occurring. The difference in intermarriage for 25–29 year olds (50% higher in Sydney) is slightly greater than that of the 40–59 year olds (45% higher in Sydney). It appears that while intermarriage is on the rise in both cities, the change is at least as great in Sydney even though it is commencing from a higher baseline.

Intermarriage in the balance of Australia is considerably higher than in either Sydney or Melbourne. Among young adults, 50% or more have intermarried. It is quite likely that some of the effect has resulted from an out-marriage by a Jewish person originally living in one of the larger cities. The intermarried couple would feel less need to be closer to communal services and therefore more likely to live elsewhere. The same effect can be seen for suburban precincts in Sydney (analysis by suburb has not been carried out for Melbourne). At all ages, intermarriage is lower among residents of suburbs close to the communal centres and higher for residents of more distant precincts.

Figure 2



Children of Intermarried Couples

The census reported 21,694 dependent children living in the households selected for study, although 185 were not present on census night and are therefore excluded from

the statistics. We also exclude a further 462 children whose fathers were not present on census night. We do not know if these children have two Jewish parents or intermarried parents. Table 3 shows the number of remaining dependent children for Jewish and intermarried couples.

Table 3: Dependent Children by Type of Marriage

No. Children	Jewish Marriage	Intermarriage	Intermarriage (%) ⁴
None	3,900	3,118	44.4
One	2,354	662	21.9
Two	3,384	1,483	30.5
Three	1,487	455	23.4
Four	331	103	23.7
Five or More	171	9	5.0
ALL	11,627	5,830	33.4

The number of dependent children was higher among the couples with two Jewish partners, probably reflecting the more complete childbearing stage of the life cycle. The dependent children of mixed marriages is estimated at 6,134 compared to 15,782 where both parents are Jewish indicating that 72% of dependent children were being raised in families with both partners Jewish. The location of these children can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Number and Location of Dependent Children by Type of Marriage

	Mixed Marriage	Jewish Marriage	All Marriages	% Mixed
Melbourne	1,819	8,046	9,865	18.4
Sydney	2,486	6,199	8,685	28.6
Balance of Australia	1,829	1,537	3,366	54.3
Total	6,134	15,782	21,232	28.0

⁴ Note that this percentage relates to marriages, not individuals as in the previous section

It can be noted that there are slightly more children of mixed marriages in the balance of Australia than there are in Melbourne, while for Jewish marriages there are more than five times as many children in Melbourne.

We now turn to the religion of the children themselves. It is assumed that the children of all Jewish marriages are Jewish although about 8% answered no religion presumably because the parents took the view that children need to determine their religion for themselves when they are of sufficient age. The stated religion for children of mixed marriages is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Religion of Children of Intermarried Parents

No. Children	Children Jewish	Children not Jewish	% Jewish
Mother Jewish	1,578	1,204	56.8
Father Jewish	441	2,227	16.5
All Intermarriage	2,019	3,431	37.0

For the children of mixed marriages, it was found that 2,019 (37%) were regarded as Jewish. There were 1,578 children with a Jewish mother and 441 with a Jewish father. However, *halacha* would recognize all 2,782 children born to Jewish mothers (assuming the mothers themselves satisfy criteria which may not be true for converts) as Jewish, while no child of a non-Jewish mother can itself be Jewish. As with the Jewish marriages, we can expect that some parents did not answer because the child was not old enough to establish religion, but we have not speculated further. If the 1,204 children of Jewish mothers remain outside the community, there has been a loss of 6.5% in terms of children validly Jewish but not regarded as such by their parents. As the higher proportion of intermarried couples at younger ages enter their years of family formation, it is probable that this percentage will rise.

Ethnicity and Inter-marriage

In a pluralistic society like Australia, there is an obvious connection between a community's strength of ethnic identity and its inter-marriage rate with the population around it. Studies from many countries have shown that with increasing time, foreign populations become more assimilated into the host environment, changing their previous habits in diet, clothing, the workplace and popular culture. In those conditions, we should not expect choice of partner to be immune from the general trend. Australia has the second largest immigrant society in the world (after Israel) and many studies here have explored the Australian experience of immigrants who have arrived in large numbers from such diverse sources as Italy, Lebanon and Vietnam.

However, the Jewish community remains an immigrant society. The proportion of the population born in Australia is still a minority although 50 years have passed since the mass migrations emanating from the Holocaust era. More than 27% of the current Jewish population arrived in this country since 1981 and almost 10% arrived during the five years between 1996 and 2001. Meanwhile the number of persons who arrived in the 1940's and 1950's is quickly declining. The familiar profile of the Australian Jewish family with parents born in Europe while children and grandchildren were born in Australia is coming to an end. A steady stream of about 1,000 arrivals per annum from South Africa has given new vitality to Australian communities and this migration continues unabated. Persons born in South Africa presently account for a larger share of the overseas-born than for all of Europe excluding the former USSR. Migration from Russia seems to have halted but Australia has welcomed more than 6,000 migrants from that source over the last 15 years. Mention should also be made of the smaller but steady

migration from Israel estimated at about 120 persons per annum. However, unlike Russia and South Africa, migration movement with Israel also moves in significant numbers in the reverse direction.

It is difficult to predict whether this new migration will act as a restraining force on the level of intermarriage. South African Jews have adjusted to life in Australia with demonstrable ease, speaking the same language and experiencing social and economic conditions not greatly different from their homeland. This was certainly not the case for the wartime European refugees. South African Jews have embraced Jewish education to an even greater degree than the existing population and participate actively in Jewish life. It will be interesting to observe whether intermarriage among those born in South Africa (very many of whom arrived in Australia as children) varies in comparison with the Australian born.

Communal Affiliation and Intermarriage

There is continuing debate about the degree to which affiliation with the Jewish community protects against intermarriage. One of the prime promotional messages of the Jewish day school movement that attracts 60% of Jewish students has been that Jewish education acts as a bulwark against intermarriage. I am frequently asked to compare intermarriage rates for day school graduates against Jewish students at other schools, either government or church run. I am unable to make a comparison because the necessary longitudinal studies would be tedious and intrusive. At the time of leaving school, the day school students clearly have a higher proportion of Jewish friends than students of other schools do. Whether that trend extends into later life and particularly to the choice of partner is simply not known.

The statistics do show a strong correlation between intermarriage and place of residence. Melbourne is known to enjoy stronger communal affiliations than Sydney does, and intermarriage is substantially lower in that city. Within both cities, the suburbs with the highest density of Jewish residents and Jewish communal facilities have lower intermarriage rates than suburbs at a greater distance. Outside Sydney and Melbourne, Jewish populations are more scattered and intermarriage is higher.

However, we must be careful to distinguish cause and effect. The reason that intermarriage is positively correlated with communal affiliation may simply reflect the greater attraction of those suburbs for full participation in Jewish life. If it is important to walk to synagogue services, to send one's children to Jewish schools and to join in Jewish social and cultural activities, one will choose to live in the areas where those facilities are available. If that is less important for one's lifestyle, he or she may well choose to live elsewhere. The tail may be wagging the dog.

Conclusion

Intermarriage is becoming more common in Australian Jewish society. The rate of intermarriage may be lower than in comparable countries of the Diaspora but it is steadily rising with each age cohort. The Jewish community loses numbers from three factors that may be closely related. These are: ethnic migration by individuals who have chosen to nominate a different religious affiliation from their previous Jewish denomination, intermarriage with a person of another faith or of no religion associated with loosening ties to Jewish life, and children of Jewish mothers whose families do not regard themselves as Jewish.

The statistics are not powerful enough for us to establish exact numerical information on the total influence of intermarriage on communal numbers and communal life. The estimates that have been raised in this paper would suggest that Australian Jewry may be directly losing about 15% of its numbers in each generation due to intermarriage, or more specifically due to exposure to pluralistic life. That 15% is derived approximately equally from ethnic migration and from the failure by Jewish mothers intermarried with a non Jewish spouse to regard their children as Jewish. There is a further indirect effect of intermarried fathers who remain Jewish themselves, but who have foregone the opportunity to contribute to the next generation of Jews.

The intermarried proportion for Australian Jews between the ages of 15 and 59 is approximately 22%, slightly higher for men than for women. Among younger people, the intermarriage rate is greater, perhaps approaching 30%. We must add to this percentage an estimate for those who have left the community due primarily to intermarriage. That figure is probably in the range of 5% to 8% of the population. Intermarriage is least common in Melbourne, the most “Jewish” of Australian cities, intermediate in Sydney, and most frequent in other parts of the country where Jewish communal life is weakest.