

## Four Questions about American Jewish Demography

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*How many Jews live in the United States? Is the number increasing or decreasing? Do more Jews live in Israel or in the United States? And do the answers to these questions matter? The controversy surrounding these issues stems from the existence of various definitions of Jewish identity as well as the methodological difficulties involved in estimating Jewish populations. It is likely that somewhere between 5.2 million and 6.4 million Jews live in the United States, with the most probable range being 6.0-6.4 million. Whether the American Jewish population is increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same is not totally clear, though it will almost certainly decrease in the future. It appears that the number of Jews in the United States is currently higher than the number in Israel, though this also is very likely to change in the future. The current and changing size of the American Jewish community has political, economic, and psychological impacts.*

The number of American Jews has been a constant source of debate almost since the beginning of European settlement in North America. More than 350 years ago, a group of twenty-three Jews from Recife (Brazil) fled Portuguese persecution and sought a safe haven in New Amsterdam (today New York City). These twenty-three paved the way for the later migration of millions of Jewish immigrants, first Sephardic Jews, then German Jews, and then East European Jews. But the twenty-three may be the last accurate count of American Jewry.

The present situation poses four questions:

1. How many Jews live in the United States?
2. Is the Jewish population of the United States increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same?
3. Do more Jews live in the United States or in Israel?
4. Do the answers to the first three questions matter?

The answers to the first two questions are not at all clear. The problems in answering them are related to two issues. First, there is no agreed definition of a Jew. Second, the U.S. Census does not ask questions that allow the direct identification of Jews. Hence other methods have been devised, none of which have the accuracy of a complete enumeration as is conducted in Israel.

*Question 1: How many Jews live in the United States?*

### Definition of Jewish Identity

The problem of defining who is, and who is not, a Jew is the subject of thousands of books and articles.[1] Broadly speaking, some define Jewishness solely in religious terms whereas others recognize its ethnic component. Officially, Orthodox and Conservative Jews only accept matrilineal descent (the practice in the Jewish community from the second century CE until the rise of the Reform movement in the nineteenth century), whereas Reform (as of 1983) and Reconstructionist Jews accept, under certain circumstances, both matrilineal and patrilineal descent. Orthodox Jews only accept as Jews those Jews-by-choice converted by Orthodox rabbis. All four branches believe that ethnic Jews who have accepted Jesus as the messiah (messianics) should not be considered Jewish. In Israel, the Orthodox establishment follows the

matrilineal-descent criterion but the government, at least for the purpose of the Law of Return, defines Jews as persons with at least one Jewish grandparent.

In general, social scientists involved in using survey research in the study of American Jews, not wishing to render judgment among the competing definitions, have adopted the stance that all survey respondents who consider themselves to be Jewish will be counted as such (except messianics). The vast majority of persons counted as Jews by social scientists were born or raised as Jews. A small percentage of survey respondents, counted by some social scientists but not by others, were born or raised as Jews but when asked if they currently consider themselves Jewish, answer negatively. Most of these respondents are found, in fact, to be involved in Jewish practices and to be emotionally attached to Israel, but answer negatively to "considering themselves to be Jewish" because they are atheists, agnostics, or of "no religion." However, they are clearly culturally and ethnically, even if not "religiously" Jewish and most Jewish community studies do count them as Jews.

A very tiny percentage of persons consider themselves Jewish and are involved in Jewish religious practice without having formally converted, simply because they are married to a Jew.

Thus, even within the broad definition used by social scientists, there are definitional issues that can result in researchers deriving different estimates of the Jewish population of a community.

In sum, one reason for the uncertainty concerning the number of American Jews is that there is little consensus on whom to include and exclude as part of that number.

## **Procedures for Estimating the Size of the American Jewish Community**

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey showed that only 5 percent of American Jews considered being Jewish solely in terms of being a member of a religious group.[2] Thus, the vast majority of American Jews viewed themselves as members of an ethnic group, and/or a cultural group, and/or a nationality. Nevertheless, the U.S. Census Bureau traditionally has viewed Jews as a religious category. Partly because of the doctrine of the separation of church and state, data on religious preference, unlike in such countries as Canada and the United Kingdom, have not been collected by the Census Bureau (except for studies conducted in 1937 and 1957).

Thus, the American Jewish community has had to rely on a series of different methodologies to derive estimates of local Jewish communities and of the Jewish population of the United States as a whole. Historically, for making estimates for local Jewish communities, these methods have included procedures involving absences from public school on major Jewish holidays,[3] a death-rate method,[4] surrogate census variables,[5] Distinctive Jewish Names (DJNs),[6] random digit dialing survey techniques,[7] and various other methodologies.[8]

Although accurate historical estimates of the size of even major Jewish communities are not available,[9] more than fifty American Jewish communities have completed demographic studies of their own populations since the early 1990s and more than seventy-five such studies have been completed since the early 1980s.[10] Most of these local-community studies have used a random digit dialing (RDD) methodology. In RDD surveys, random telephone numbers are generated by a computer using all the three-digit area codes and three-digit telephone exchange codes in a study area. When a number is dialed, there is no guarantee that a household, let alone a Jewish household, is reached. The RDD methodology is necessary for a study to obtain results that accurately represent a population. The major advantage of this methodology is that it produces a random sample of Jewish households to be interviewed.

The RDD methodology also has the advantages of yielding a higher survey- cooperation rate than other methods, guaranteeing anonymity to respondents, and providing the ability to interview households with unpublished telephone numbers and households who have recently migrated

into an area. Perhaps more important, the RDD methodology does not rely on Jewish households making themselves known to the Jewish community by joining a synagogue, a Jewish Community Center, or other Jewish organizations, or by donating money to a Jewish fundraising campaign.

Thus, a more accurate representation of the Jewish community should be obtained with RDD than with telephone-directory methods or methods that rely on randomly selecting households from Jewish organization mailing lists. When RDD is used, the Jewish population is estimated based on the percentage of households reached in which the respondent indicates that at least one Jewish person resides. If, say, 4 percent of households in an area contain someone who is Jewish, then an estimate of the number of Jewish households can be made by taking 4 percent of the number of households that the U.S. Census reports in that area.

### Three Methods

In recent years, three methods have been employed to derive estimates of the national Jewish population.

First, major national demographic studies were completed in 1971,[11] 1990,[12] and 2000-01,[13] which provided estimates of the Jewish population of the country as a whole. The latter two studies used RDD procedures. The 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS 2000) estimated 5.2 million American Jews and the 2000 American Jewish Identity Survey (ARIS) using similar methodology, estimated 5.3 million. The authors of NJPS 2000 suggest that their estimate is probably too low and the reason for the assumed underestimate is explained by Sheskin and Dashefsky.[14] In brief, analysis of NJPS data indicates that Jews were less likely to respond to NJPS than non-Jews, leading to an underestimate of the percentage of American households containing a Jew.

DellaPergola provides an additional reason why it is easy to believe that the 5.2 million is an undercount:

Due to immigration during the 1990s, U.S. Jewry actually should have increased by about 250,000 to over 5.7 million, even assuming zero population growth. The fact that the reported NJPS total Jewish population (with people in institutions) was 5.2 million points to an even larger gap between the expected and the actual. The suspicion of significant undercounting in the 2001 NJPS thus would seem plausible.[15]

Second, a new method developed at the Brandeis University Steinhardt Social Research Institute by Saxe et al.[16] uses a technique called meta-analysis that combines the results of more than thirty national RDD surveys that asked questions about religion. This study suggests a population of 6.0-6.4 million Jews, the same range found by Sheskin and Dashefsky in the *American Jewish Year Book (AJYB)*.

Third, for decades, the *AJYB* has been providing annual estimates of the Jewish population of the United States by summing estimates for more than five hundred American Jewish communities. Basically, the estimates derive from two sources. The first is *scientific estimates*, which are based on the results of some type of scientific study of a community. In almost all cases these studies involved the use of RDD telephone surveys.

The second source is *informant estimates*. For communities in which no scientific study has been completed, a local informant is contacted. These individuals generally have access to information on the number of households on the local Jewish Federation's mailing list and the number of households with membership in various local Jewish organizations and synagogues.

The 2006 *AJYB*[17] article by Sheskin and Dashefsky reported at most 6.4 million Jews, with more than 80 percent of that total being based on scientific studies and only 20 percent on the less reliable informant procedure. But the use of informant estimates has been criticized by

DellaPergola and others (including this author). Clearly, scientific estimates are superior to informant estimates. If the latter are significantly too high then the overall estimate of 6.0-6.4 million Jews will be too high. Thus, Sheskin and Dashefsky[18] analyze the extent to which informant estimates reflect "reality" as found by scientific studies. This analysis examines the results of seventy-seven scientific community studies that have been completed since 1981 as well as the *AJYB* estimate in the year just before the completion of a scientific study.

Two examples clarify the problems with informant estimates. The first scientific study for Jacksonville, Florida, was completed in 2002. Until that time, the *AJYB* estimate for Jacksonville was 7,300, a number provided by a local Jewish Federation informant. The study found 12,900 Jews in Jacksonville, a difference of 5,600 Jews or 43 percent. In this case, the local Jewish Federation executive suspected that 7,300 was too low an estimate but simply had never updated the estimate with the *AJYB* authors.

In Chicago, with some guidance from a 1981 scientific study, the *AJYB* estimate for it was 248,000. A 1990 Chicago scientific study put the number at 261,000. This number remained in the *AJYB* until a 2000 Chicago scientific study revised it to 270,500.

Some of the greatest absolute overestimates by the *AJYB* have occurred in northeastern communities such as New York (1991 study-251,000 overestimate), Philadelphia (1997-43,900), and Detroit (2005-22,000). These significant overestimates were caused by the *AJYB* publishing estimates from old scientific studies. Although local informants no doubt suspected decreasing populations in these communities, with no methodology to document such loss, the results from the last demographic study continued to be printed for each community in the *AJYB*. Note that, when the decrease in the New York Jewish population was offset by immigration and the Jewish population of New York leveled off, the New York 2002 study shows that the absolute difference between the study result and the *AJYB* data the year before the study was only 38,000.

Note also that some of the greatest absolute underestimates by the *AJYB* have occurred in Sunbelt communities such as San Francisco (2004 study-86,100 underestimate), Washington, DC (2003-50,500), Atlanta (2006-33,900), and West Palm Beach (2005-27,400). Again, these significant underestimates were caused by the *AJYB* publishing estimates from old scientific studies. Although, again, local informants no doubt suspected an increasing population, with no methodology to document such gains, the results from the last demographic study continued to be printed in the *AJYB*.

But in most cases, the number of Jews found by the scientific study and the informant estimate are in relatively close correspondence. For example, the 1999 Baltimore study found 91,400 Jews compared to the informant estimate of 94,500 Jews. The corresponding numbers for Minneapolis are 29,300 and 31,500; San Antonio, 10,200 and 11,000; Pittsburgh, 42,400 and 40,000; and for Tucson, 22,400 and 20,000.

Although this analysis indicates that for individual communities the results from a Jewish community study may be quite different from the *AJYB* informant estimate, for many communities the informant estimate is *not* widely disparate from the estimate provided by a scientific study.

Most important, the seventy-seven scientific studies totaled 9,046,145 Jews. The informant estimates totaled 8,756,500 Jews, a difference of only 289,645 or about 3 percent. Thus, *on average*, the informant estimates seem to estimate reality relatively well. This is an important finding that relates to the criticism leveled at *AJYB* estimates: that the informant estimates may not be accurate. Looked at community by community, this does appear to be the case for some communities. On the other hand, the underestimates and the overestimates seem largely to cancel each other out. This analysis is one more reason to have confidence that the *AJYB* estimate of 6.4 million is closer to the truth than the NJPS estimate of 5.2 million.

Sheskin and Dashefsky suggested three groups, some of whose members may be counted twice when a national estimate is derived by summing more than five hundred local Jewish community estimates: part-year households (households who spend part of the year in one community and

part in another), college students (who live in two communities), and households who moved from one community to another between local Jewish community studies. An example of the last group would be, say, a household who moved from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Sarasota, Florida, in 1999. This household would have been counted both in the 1996 Milwaukee Jewish community study and in the 2001 Sarasota Jewish community study. Based on these methodological issues, Sheskin and Dashefsky have concluded that 6.0-6.4 million Jews live in the United States.

DellaPergola suggests several additional reasons why estimates of the American Jewish population derived from summing estimates for individual communities may lead to flawed results. This author, while not disagreeing with that basic contention, has more faith in the results of this summation than does DellaPergola. It is thus useful to address some of his concerns with this methodology that have not been dealt with above.[19]

## DellaPergola's Issues

Concern 1: Many of the scientific estimates presented in any edition of the *AJYB* are quite dated and may be inaccurate. At the time of DellaPergola's analysis, over 80 percent of the population count based on scientific studies in the *AJYB* was based on scientific studies less than ten years old. Many new local Jewish- community studies have been completed since 2002 (when DellaPergola analyzed the dates of the scientific estimates in the *AJYB*), so this picture has significantly improved. In addition, for many communities where two scientific studies have been completed at a ten-year interval, the change in the size of the Jewish population is not significant. Moreover, decreases in the Jewish population of some communities, as implied by Sheskin and Dashefsky's analysis, are doubtless offset by increases in other communities.

Concern 2: Some local studies have reported estimates of the Jewish population that have included non-Jewish household members. This author is aware of at least two examples of this: Rochester's study in 1986[20] and Boston's study in 1995.[21] As the current contributor of the *AJYB* article, this author has examined every local Jewish community study report and found no current example of this problem.

Concern 3: A number of DellaPergola's criticisms are related to the fact that different Jewish community studies have used varying methodologies to identify Jewish households: both the screening questions to identify Jewish households and the questionnaires differ from community to community. This is certainly true, although the vast majority of community studies have now been completed by one of two researchers (Ira Sheskin and the team of Jack Ukeles and Ron Miller) providing some standardization. It is true that different researchers might derive different estimates for the same community, but this author's contention is that these estimates are likely to be only marginally different.

Concern 4: Community studies have used different sampling techniques, including RDD, Distinctive Jewish Name (DJNs), Jewish community lists, and snowball sampling.[22] This author is aware of no Jewish community study whose results have been reported in the *AJYB* that has used snowball sampling. More significant, the important data for the population estimates are derived from the RDD part of the sample and are not affected by the use of list or DJN sampling. A more complete discussion of the problems of comparing local Jewish community study results with one another and with NJPS is available.[23]

Concern 5: Data collection techniques have used both telephone surveys and face-to-face interviews. This is simply not true. All scientific studies reported in the *AJYB* used an RDD telephone survey. The percentage of Jews determined in the RDD portion of the survey is the major determinant of the Jewish population size estimated by each study.

Concern 6: Some local-community studies have used respondent selection (randomly selecting a respondent from adults in a household), some have interviewed whoever answers the telephone,

and others have interviewed either the head of the household or the spouse of the head. While this is true, it has no impact on population-estimation procedures.

Concern 7: Geographical boundaries of locations reported in the *AJYB* may overlap. This concern amounts to the possibility that two local communities that are geographically close, such as Philadelphia and Wilmington (Delaware), are both counting the same Jews who live in areas between the two Jewish federations. Again, as the contributor of the article in the *AJYB*, this author knows of no instance where such overlap exists.

Concern 8: An assumption is made of three members per Jewish household. At one time, informants often were summing the number of households who were members of local synagogues (or taking the number of households on the Jewish Federation mailing list) and assuming a household size of three. Starting in about the mid-1990s, Jeffrey Scheckner (at United Jewish Communities) and this author devised a new letter requesting Jewish-population estimates from informants and suggesting a possible range of household sizes. The letter also suggested that the informants take into account that not all persons in Jewish households were in fact Jewish and that they multiply known households (plus a suspected number of unknown households) by a household size that they then needed to adjust downward so as to not report non-Jews in Jewish households.

Thus, while certainly there are problems with developing a population estimate by summing local-community estimates, many of DellaPergola's criticisms are not well founded.

In sum, estimates of the American Jewish population range from 5.2 to 6.4 million, with neither of the two extremes being likely. Given the findings of the Brandeis study and the sum of the local studies from the *AJYB* (despite some legitimate methodological problems), the most likely range for the population is 6.0-6.4 million.

*Question 2: Is the American Jewish population increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same?*

As with Question 1, the available evidence yields no definitive answer. Table 1 shows that the estimate of the number of Jews provided in the *AJYB* would imply an increasing population (by about 7 percent from 1990 to 2006), whereas the data from NJPS 1990 and NJPS 2000 would imply a decreasing population (by about 5 percent).

But is this really the case? Given the methodology used by the *AJYB*, the 7 percent difference *may* be within the margin of error of the methodology.[24] Given sampling and other error, the 5.2 million Jews found by NJPS 2000 is within the margin of error of the 5.5 million found by NJPS 1990. But even with the methodological issues involved, it is certainly disconcerting that the two methodologies yield opposite conclusions.

It is possible to look at Jewish population change theoretically using the basic *ethnic* demographic equation:

$$\begin{aligned} P_2 = & P_1 + \text{Births} - \text{Deaths} \\ & + \text{In-migration} - \text{Out-migration} \\ & + \text{Conversion in/opting in} - \text{Conversion out/opting out} \end{aligned}$$

where  $P_2$  is the population in time 2 and  $P_1$  is the population in time 1.

According to estimates by DellaPergola[25] based on NJPS 2000, about fifty thousand Jews are born in the United States annually and about sixty thousand Jews die annually for a *natural decrease* annually of ten thousand Jews. DellaPergola also estimates an increase of five thousand Jews per year due to a net in-migration (i.e., five thousand more Jews move into the United States each year than move out). Thus, the first four elements in the equation (Births, Deaths, In-migration, and Out-migration) suggest a loss of about five thousand Jews per year in the United States, a trivial number as a percentage of the total American Jewish population.

Although it is impossible to estimate the number of Jews who convert to other religions or who "opt out" of being Jewish by simply no longer identifying as Jews, it is almost certainly greater than the number of persons who convert to Judaism or "opt in" without conversion. Thus, no doubt the final two elements in the equation (conversion in/opting in and conversion out/opting out) yield a decreasing number of Jews.

Two other factors portend a decrease as well. First, 16 percent of American Jews are elderly compared to 12 percent for all Americans. Second, for a population to replace itself, married couples need to average 2.15 children each. Jewish women aged 40-44 average 1.86 children each, not all of whom are being raised as Jews. Thus, it is likely that the number of Jewish deaths in the United States will continue to be higher than the number of Jewish births.

**Table 1: Comparisons of Estimates of the US Jewish Population over Time**

| Year | American Jewish Yearbook | National Jewish Population Survey |
|------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1990 | 5.941.000                | 5.500.000                         |
| 1991 | 5.981.000                |                                   |
| 1992 | 5.798.000                |                                   |
| 1993 | 5.828.000                |                                   |
| 1994 | 5.840.000                |                                   |
| 1995 | 5.880.000                |                                   |
| 1996 | 5.900.000                |                                   |
| 1997 | 6.000.000                |                                   |
| 1998 | 6.005.000                |                                   |
| 1999 | 6.061.000                |                                   |
| 2000 | 6.136.000                | 5.200.000                         |
| 2001 | 6.165.000                |                                   |
| 2002 | 6.400.000                |                                   |

Notes:

1. Methodological reasons exist for the apparent decrease in the *AJYB* estimates from 1991 to 1992.
2. The *AJYB* did not publish estimates between 2001 and 2006.

However, it is also likely that the number of Jews moving into the country will continue to outstrip the number migrating out. Relatively few Jews are leaving the United States, whereas Jews continue to arrive in the United States from Latin America and other locales. The large immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union has to some extent counteracted the loss that is due to opting out.

Thus, the answer to Question 2 is that most likely, while the American Jewish population has been relatively stable over the past decade or so, it will decrease in the future.[26] However, as implied above, the evidence is not totally supportive of this conclusion.

*Question 3: Do more Jews live in the United States or in Israel?*

In his article on Jewish population in the 2006 *American Jewish Year Book*, DellaPergola states that:

Israel's Jewish population (not including more than 300,000 non-Jewish immigrants admitted in the framework of the Law of Return) surpassed 5.3 million in 2006, or 40.6 percent of world Jewry. This represented not only a population increase of more than 76,000 over 2005, but also a landmark watershed in Jewish population history. Indeed, after critically reviewing all available evidence on Jewish demographic trends, it is now plausible to claim that Israel has overcome the United States in hosting the largest Jewish community worldwide.[27]

This author respectfully disputes this claim. Three factors need to be considered.

First, the Jewish population data for Israel are based on modern census techniques and are considerably more reliable than the U.S. estimates, which are based on survey research techniques. Second, the estimate of 5.2 million Jews in the United States is based on NJPS 2000 whose survey research procedure has a margin of error around that estimate. The estimate for Israel, based on updates of the Israeli Census, also has a margin of error around the estimate of 5,313,800. Thus, even if one accepts NJPS as accurate, the margin of error around the estimate of 5.2 million Jews according to NJPS includes within it the number of Jews in Israel.

Third, the evidence presented in Question 1 above strongly suggests that the estimate of 5.2 million Jews from NJPS 2000 is too low. It is also true that the methodology of simply summing local estimates to arrive at a national estimate (which was suggested to be 6.0-6.4 million) doubtless overestimates the size of the Jewish population. Even if one gives credence to only a minority of the above-presented arguments, it appears unlikely that only 5,275,000 Jews live in the United States.[28] This contention is supported as well by the Brandeis study.[29]

Thus, while the Jewish population of Israel will eventually overtake the Jewish population of the United States, this is unlikely to have happened already as of 2006.

*Question 4: Do the answers to the first three questions matter?*

The first three questions have been answered, albeit imperfectly:

1. The American Jewish population is most likely between 5.2 million and 6.4 million and is even more likely between 6.0-6.4 million as of 2006.
2. The evidence as to whether the American Jewish population is increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same is mixed. The most likely conclusion is that the Jewish population has remained at a relatively steady number over the past decade but is likely to decrease in the future.
3. The American Jewish population still outnumbers that of Israel, although this will most likely change in the future.

As to why these questions matter, they do, and some of the reasons are political, economic, or psychological. Also important, as will be seen below, is that these answers matter more at some geographic scales than at others. That is, certain factors have much more impact at local levels than at national or international levels. That demographic issues are important to the future of the Jewish people is emphasized by DellaPergola in an excellent contribution.[30]

## **Political Implications of the Number of Jews**

About 303 million persons lived in the United States as of the fall of 2007. If the 5.2 million estimate is correct, then Jews are 1.7 percent of the U.S. population. If the 6.4 million estimate is correct, then Jews are 2.1 percent of this population. It is difficult to imagine that political influence, that is, the Jewish community's ability to affect public policy on issues of importance to the Jewish community (such as church-state separation, various social issues, civil rights, and



Israel), would be affected by the difference between these two percentages. Although Jews are only about 2 percent of the U.S. population, given the higher percentage of Jews among American adults and the fact that Jews tend to register to vote and to cast their votes in higher proportions than other Americans, it is likely that about 4 percent of votes cast in an average presidential election are cast by Jews.

Jewish political influence in presidential elections derives not from being perhaps 4 percent of the national electorate but from the U.S. electoral college system, which has the effect of making one's vote "worth more" in more populous states with more electoral votes. Of the 269 electoral votes needed to be elected president, 128 are concentrated in four states with large Jewish populations: New York (8.4 percent Jewish), California (3.3 percent Jewish), Florida (3.7 percent Jewish), and New Jersey (5.5 percent Jewish). The top ten states with a significant Jewish population have a total of 246 electoral votes.

Thus it is not the total number of Jews nationwide but rather their geographic concentration in just a few states that is important. Note as well that the significant migration of American Jews over the past few decades from the Northeast and the Midwest to the South and the West<sup>[31]</sup> had no significant influence on this analysis as Jews have tended to relocate in states such as California and Florida, both of which have substantial numbers of electoral votes.

This same geographic concentration of Jews helps, in part, to explain the thirteen Jews in the 2006 Senate, although some Jewish senators were elected from states such as Minnesota and Oregon that have tiny Jewish populations.

Jewish political influence in congressional elections also is affected by geographic concentration within states. More than 60 percent of the American Jewish population lives in just twelve metropolitan areas (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Broward, Washington, Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia, South Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, Atlanta, and Miami). Thus, Jews are concentrated within certain congressional districts. The 2006 House of Representatives contained thirty Jews. Although many were elected from congressional districts in the Northeast and Midwest with large Jewish populations, others were elected from states (such as in Kentucky and Tennessee) and districts where very few Jews live, implying that Americans are willing to vote for Jews on the basis of the individual merit of the candidate. These same geographic concentrations also result in Jews being elected to state and local offices out-of-proportion to their numbers.

Another potential reason why Jews enjoy significant political influence is that non-Jews seem to have an inflated impression of the percentage of Americans who are Jewish. Almost 40 percent of Americans think that 20 percent or more of Americans are Jewish and about 60 percent think that 10 percent or more are Jewish. Only 18 percent think that less than 5 percent of Americans are Jewish.<sup>[32]</sup>

But it is also clear that non-Jews are willing to vote for Jewish candidates and that Jewish political influence is due less to overall numbers and more to geographic concentration, Jewish participation in the democratic process, donations to political parties, political activism and, in some cases, individual merit.

## **Political Implications of Changes in the Number of Jews**

That the American Jewish population is likely to decrease in the future is certainly not without political implications, although, at least in the short run, the impact may not be *all* in the direction of decreasing influence. By 2050 the U.S. population is projected by the Population Reference Bureau<sup>[33]</sup> to be 419,900,000. If the American Jewish population even decreases to, say, five million, then only 1.2% of Americans will be Jewish, down significantly from the 2.1% currently indicated by the estimate of 6.4 million. On the face of it such a decrease would imply a decrease

in political influence. However, for the same reason that it may not matter today whether Jews are 1.7% or 2.1% of the U.S. population, it may not matter that Jews may be 1.2% in the future.

Recall that the major reason for the decrease in Jewish population is, at least today, not natural decrease but the large numbers of Jews who are "opting out" of their Jewish identity. Most of these Jews are not currently politically active on behalf of Jewish causes and the losses in Jewish identification are much more likely to occur in areas with low Jewish populations and low numbers of electoral votes.[34] Thus, despite decreasing numbers of Jews and a decrease in the percentage of Americans who are Jewish, it is possible that Jewish political influence can continue if a core of committed Jews remains in key states.

Another factor to consider is the effect of intermarriage. According to NJPS 2000, 31 percent of married American Jews are currently married to non-Jews.[35] As a result of intermarriage, the number of households containing a Jewish person increased between 1990 and 2000 from 2.7 million to 2.9 million and the number of persons living in households with one or more Jews increased from 6.6 million to 6.7 million.[36] DellaPergola estimates that more than ten million Americans would qualify to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return.[37]

Thus, while the number of Jews may decrease, the number of households containing Jews (or at least persons of Jewish heritage) is increasing.[38] To the extent that Jews in these households maintain some ties to their heritage (particularly in terms of support for Israel) and to the extent that they can influence other household members, intermarriage, at least for one generation, may actually *increase* the influence of Jews. It is, however, much less likely that the children of intermarriage will maintain Jewish ties as adults.

## Economic Implications of the Number of Jews and of Changes in the Number of Jews

Maintaining a Jewish community is expensive and the cost of being Jewish is often cited by respondents to local Jewish community studies as the major reason for their nonparticipation in the community.[39] Economically, much less impact is felt by national institutions if the number of American Jews decreases than is the case at the metropolitan area scale, particularly for small Jewish communities. Some larger Jewish communities such as Detroit,[40] Miami,[41] and Philadelphia[42] have shown recent decreases in Jewish population, but the impact on the community's ability to maintain itself is not great. Detroit's Jewish population decreased from 1989-2005 from 89,000 to 72,000. Miami's Jewish population decreased from 1994-2004 from 143,000 to 113,000. Philadelphia's Jewish population decreased from 1983-1996 from 240,000 to 206,000. In all three cases, the number of Jews remaining in the community was sufficient to maintain existing institutions.

On the other hand, the ability of smaller Jewish communities to maintain their institutions is sometimes affected. This happened, for example, in Atlantic City (New Jersey),[43] Harrisburg (Pennsylvania),[44] and Hartford (Connecticut).[45] Atlantic City's Jewish population decreased from 1994-2002 by 11 percent, from 11,200 households to 10,000 households. Harrisburg's Jewish population decreased from 1985-1994 by 17 percent, from 3,800 households to 3,200 households. Hartford's Jewish population decreased from 1990-2000 by 6 percent, from 16,000 households to 14,800 households. The effect of this has already been seen in the South, where forty-four very small Jewish communities that existed in 1960 ceased to exist by 1997.[46]

## Psychological Implications of the Number of Jews and of Changes in the Number of Jews

At the national scale, many Jews trying to maintain their Jewish identity and that of their children and grandchildren are psychologically affected by information that the Jewish population is

declining. For many years, both the secular and Jewish press referred to America's six million Jews. The finding of 5.5 million Jews in 1990 and 5.2 million in 2000, combined with very high intermarriage rates led to two separate reactions. For Jews who had themselves chosen to become less involved in Jewish life, their choice was confirmed by the fact that many others had followed the same path. For other Jews, the impact of these findings led to establishing Jewish-continuity commissions in many Jewish communities, which led to additional funding for both formal and informal Jewish education and to funding for programs like Birthright Israel, which attempts to connect Jewish college-age youth with Israel (and hence to their Jewish identity) by providing tens of thousands of free trips to Israel.

At the local geographic scale, this author recently had a conversation with the executive director of a small southern Jewish community. She stated that she would very much like to undertake a community study of her community. She was very concerned, however, that since the community has always thought its Jewish population was about six thousand, if the study found a significantly lower number, or showed that the Jewish population was decreasing, such news would depress the community and lead to despair that might harm fundraising efforts.

## Impact of the Relative Size of the Jewish Population of Israel and the United States

As noted, it is highly unlikely that the Jewish population of Israel is larger than that of the United States. When the opposite was announced in the Israeli press, the report no doubt met with a positive reaction from the Israeli public. DellaPergola asserts in his *AJYB* article that "for the first time since the first century C.E., a plurality of world Jewry may be claimed to reside in the historical homeland."<sup>[47]</sup> Although Zionist philosophy is complex and debated, many Zionists have historically contended that Jews could only live a Jewish life in Israel, that all Jews should move to Israel, and that Diaspora Jewish communities are destined to disappear.

Doubtless, as the American Jewish population decreases and the Israeli Jewish population increases, the latter will surpass the former. However, considering the number of Jews in the United States and the above-discussed population trends, it will be many years before this Diaspora Jewish community is in danger of disappearing.

## Conclusions

It has been said that the only people wrong more often than economists are demographers. With respect to Jewish demography, accuracy is even more problematic. What Jewish demographer in say, 1880, would have predicted the major changes that occurred in the twentieth century: significant growth of the Jewish population followed by the Holocaust and the movement of Jews from Europe to the United States and Israel and from the Arab countries to Israel? Thus, the uncertainty found in trying to answer the first two of the four questions addressed here-on the American Jewish population and on whether it is increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same-must be accompanied by a sober understanding of both the limits of demography in predicting the future as well as the unique history of the Jewish people. DellaPergola<sup>[48]</sup> rightly notes that "Jewish population figures and estimates should always be taken as orders of magnitude surrounded by variable and sometimes significant margins of error."

Nevertheless, these are critical questions with important implications that should be explored. It has been found here that, most likely, 6.0-6.4 million Jews live in the United States, this population is currently stable but will probably decrease in the future, and there are still more Jews in the United States than in Israel. In addition, these findings have important political, economic, and psychological implications for American Jews.

From its humble beginning with twenty persons in the 1600s, the American Jewish population increased until it constituted a plurality of the world's Jewish population in the twentieth century. It

appears that this Jewish community will maintain numbers large enough that it will continue to significantly influence events both in the United States and the Jewish world internationally.

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## Notes

[1] Sergio DellaPergola presents an interesting summary of this issue as it related to modern research in "Was It the Demography: A Reassessment of American Jewish Population Estimates, 1945-2001," *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 25 (2005): 85-131.

[2] Barry A. Kosmin et al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991), 28.

[3] The assumption on which this method was based was that, no matter the level of religious observance, practically all Jewish children refrain from attending school on Yom Kippur. Comparing public school attendance on Yom Kippur with attendance on other days yields a fairly accurate estimate of the number of Jewish children in public schools. After adding the number of Jewish children enrolled in Jewish day schools, the total Jewish population may be extrapolated using the proportion of schoolchildren in the white population as a whole. This method has become problematic because the assumption on which it is based has become increasingly less reliable.

[4] The number of Jewish decedents may be obtained from death records on which the place of interment or religion may be found. If one then assumes that the Jewish death rate is similar to the white population as a whole, then the total Jewish population may be extrapolated (see George E. Barnett, "A Method of Determining the Jewish Population of Large Cities in the United States," paper presented at a meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society, College Park, MD, 1902; Ira Rosenwaike, "Using Death Records for Estimating the Jewish Elderly Population in Local Areas," in Steven M. Cohen, Jonathan S. Woocher, and Bruce Phillips, eds., *Perspectives in Jewish Population Research* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1974], 119-28). In areas where the Jewish population is considerably older than the white population, such as the Florida retirement areas, this procedure would clearly not be reliable.

[5] The 1970 census asked this question: "What language, other than English, was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?" Using information from the 1971 National Jewish Population Study, Rosenwaike ("Using Death Records") calculated a conversion factor between the number of persons reporting Yiddish and the total number of Jews. The procedure was shown to yield reasonable estimates of the Jewish population of neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, the question of mother tongue was dropped starting with the 1980 census.

Some researchers have used the percentage of Persons of Russian Stock as an indicator of Jewish population (see Eric Rosenthal, "The Equivalence of U.S. Census Data for Persons of Russian Stock or Descent with American Jews: An Evaluation," *Demography*, 1975, 275-90; Philip H. Rees, "The Factorial Ecology of Metropolitan Chicago, 1960," in Brian J. L. Berry and Frank L. Horton, eds., *Geographical Perspectives on Urban Systems* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968]). Joshua Comenetz in "Census-Based Estimates of the Hasidic Jewish Population," *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 20 (2006): 35-74, recently revived the use of Yiddish as a surrogate census variable to estimate the size of the Hasidic community in New York.

[6] Ira M. Sheskin, "A Methodology for Examining the Changing Size and Spatial Distribution of a Jewish Population: A Miami Case Study," *Shofar, Special Issue: Studies in Jewish Geography* (Neil G. Jacobs, special guest ed.), Vol. 17, No. 1 (1998): 97-116; Ira M. Sheskin, "Estimating the Number of Jews in the Service Area of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County: Lessons for All Jewish Communities," *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 10 (1989): 3-17.

[7] David P. Varady and Spaniel J. Mandel, Jr., "Estimating the Size of Jewish Communities Using Random Telephone Surveys," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 1982, 225-34.

[8] Barry A. Kosmin, Paul Ritterband, and Jeffrey Scheckner, "Counting Jewish Populations: Methods and Problems," in David Singer and Lawrence Grossman, eds., *American Jewish Year Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 204-20.

[9] Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data 1585-1984* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990).

[10] Both the data sets and the reports for these studies are available at <http://www.jewishdatabank.org/>.

[11] Frank Massarik and Alvin Chenkin, "United States National Jewish Population Study," in David Singer and Lawrence Grossman, eds., *American Jewish Year Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 264-306.

[12] Kosmin et al., *Highlights*.

[13] Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, Steven M. Cohen, Jonathon Ament, Vivian Klaff, Frank Mott, and Danyelle Peckerman, *Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (New York: United Jewish Community, 2003); Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, *American Jewish Identity Survey, 2001* (New York: Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001).

[14] Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, "Jewish Population of the United States, 2006," in David Singer and Lawrence Grossman, eds., *American Jewish Year Book 2006* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006), 133-93.

[15] DellaPergola, "Was It the Demography," 107.

[16] Leonard Saxe, Elizabeth Tighe, Benjamin Phillips, and Charles Kadushin, *Reconsidering the Size and Characteristics of the American Jewish Population: New Estimates of a Larger and More Diverse Community* (Boston: Brandeis University Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2007).

[17] Sheskin and Dashefsky, "Jewish Population."

[18] Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, "Jewish Population of the United States, 2007," in David Singer and Lawrence Grossman, eds., *American Jewish Year Book 2007* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2007).

[19] DellaPergola, "Was It the Demography," 92-95.

[20] Gary A. Tobin and Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Population Study of the Jewish Community of Rochester* (Rochester: Jewish Community Federation of Rochester, 1986).

[21] Sherry R. Israel, *Greater Boston 1995 Community Study* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1996).

[22] Snowball sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling in which referrals from an initial sample are used to locate additional respondents.

[23] Ira M. Sheskin, "Comparisons between Local Jewish Community Studies and the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey," *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 25 (2005): 158-92.

[24] DellaPergola, "Was It the Demography," 107, agrees with this assessment.

[25] Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 2006," in Singer and Grossman, *American Jewish Year Book 2006*, 559-601.

[26] This conclusion is generally supported by Vivian Klaff, "Broken Down by Sex and Age: Projecting the American Jewish Population," *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 19 (1998): 1-37; Sergio DellaPergola, S. U. Rebhun, and M. Tolts, "Prospecting the Jewish Future: Population Projections, 2000-2080," in David Singer and Lawrence Grossman, eds., *American Jewish Year Book* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2000), 103-46.

[27] DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population," 559.

[28] The 5,275,000 estimate for the American Jewish population is used by DellaPergola in his 2006 *American Jewish Year Book* article and is based on an update of both the NJPS 2000 and ARIS estimates.

[29] Saxe, Tighe, Phillips, and Kadushin, *Reconsidering*.

[30] Sergio DellaPergola, *Jewish Demography: Facts, Outlook, Challenges* ([Jerusalem](#): Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2003).

[31] Ira M. Sheskin, "Geographic Differences among American Jews," Report 8, United Jewish Communities Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01, 2005.

[32] Richard Nadeau, Richard G. Niemi, and Jeffrey Levine, "Innumeracy about Minority Populations," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (1993): 332-347.

[33] <http://www.prb.org/>.

[34] Sheskin, *Geographic Differences*.

[35] For the latest data on intermarriage in the American Jewish community, see Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of San Antonio* (San Antonio: Jewish Federation of San Antonio, 2007), 6-85 to 6-87, <http://www.jewishdatabank.org/>.

[36] The American Jewish Identity Survey (completed by Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar, *American Jewish Identity Survey, 2001*) suggested that the number of households with one or more Jews increased from 3.2 million in 1990 to 3.9 million in 2000.

[37] DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population," 560.

[38] This is similar to DellaPergola's argument that while the Core Jewish population is declining, the enlarged Jewish population is increasing. See DellaPergola, "Was It the Demography," 89.

[39] See, e.g., the importance of cost in sending children to Jewish day school, in joining synagogues, and in joining a Jewish Community Center, in Sheskin, *Jewish Community Study*, 7-33, 7-53, 8-56.

[40] Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Detroit* (Detroit: Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, 2007).

[41] Ira M. Sheskin, *The Greater Miami Jewish Community Study* (Miami: Greater Miami Jewish Federation, 2005).

[42] Ukeles Associates, *Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia 1996/1997* (Philadelphia: Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, 1997).

[43] Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, NJ* (Atlantic City, NJ: Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, 2005).

[44] Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Greater Harrisburg* (Harrisburg, PA: United Jewish Community of Greater Harrisburg, 1994).

[45] Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Federation of Hartford Community Study* (Hartford: Jewish Federation of Hartford, 2001).

[46] Ira M. Sheskin, "The Dixie Diaspora: The 'Loss' of the Small Southern Jewish Community," *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (May 2000): 52-74.

[47] DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population," 560.

[48] DellaPergola "Was It the Demography," 90.

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