

The Number of Jews in the United States: Definitions and Methodologies in Contradictory Surveys

2013 was exceptionally fruitful in terms of national surveys of Jews in the United States. Findings from four different surveys were published – by the Pew Research Center,¹ Brandeis University,² The American Jewish Yearbook (AJY),³ and demographer Sergio DellaPergola.⁴ These studies suggest varying numbers for the U.S. Jewish population, with the difference ranging from several thousands to over a million (see Table 1). These sizable

differences carry significant implications for the assessment of U.S. Jewry, as well as for formulating appropriate policy. In addition, in terms of size, these numbers place the Jewish American community either above or beneath the Jewish population of Israel (around 6.1 million as of late 2013).⁵ Thus, the symbolically and ideologically important question of which Jewish community is the world's largest remains open to debate.

Table 1 – Varying Estimates of the Number of Jews in the United States

| Source | Estimated Number of Jews (millions) |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Brandeis University | 6.814 |
| American Jewish Yearbook | 6.721 |
| Pew Research Center | 6.700 |
| DellaPergola | 5.425 |

As all these numerical estimates refer to recent years, their discrepancies may be explained by their respective survey methodologies, and especially by two key criteria on which they are predicated – the definition of who is a Jew, and the

methodology used for counting these Jews. This chapter examines and compares the definitions and methods employed by the four studies in an attempt to clarify the actual picture as best as possible.

Methodology

U.S. Jewish population surveys have employed different methodologies, and this is a focus of disagreement among recent studies. There are pros and cons to each approach, along with certain principled choices that combine to create a complex, often contradictory picture of the U.S. Jewish community.

Of the studies discussed here, Pew's research has the simplest and most direct design and methodology, for better or worse, because its estimation of the size of the Jewish population is a secondary derivative of the analysis. The estimate is based on the percentage of Jews in the general population as found in a nationwide population survey.

This survey comprised about 25,000 respondents and was conducted by telephone in English and Russian. Respondents were asked about their households, including adults and children, and about the Jewish identity of each household member. The survey was conducted on a limited scale, confined mainly to areas and groups where the likelihood of reaching Jewish respondents was relatively high. This limited range means that the survey is a representative sample of only 84% of the general population. In order to compensate for areas and

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groups not included in the survey, the study also relied on other data that enabled estimating the percentage of Jews in the remaining 16% of the general U.S. population, including speakers of other languages, residents of areas not included in the survey, those without a telephone line, etc. The percentages of the different types of Jewish identities found among these populations were weighted against the total U.S. population, and the total number of Jews was extrapolated based on these figures. 'Net' population figures were about 2.2% of the adult population and 1.7% of minors, which led to the final figure: 6.7 million. As is the case for any survey, the findings must be weighted against sampling errors, various biases, and other interferences, which is why the authors themselves suggest that their figures be regarded as a general rough estimates.

Conversely, the Brandeis University study is based on a broad database, which allows it to claim that its findings are a comprehensive and reliable estimate of the number of Jews in the U.S. This study used statistical routines for weighting the data of 348 surveys, conducted by a variety of independent or government sources, in which respondents were asked about their religion. These were mostly telephone surveys carried out between 2006 and 2012, involving a total of 328,000 adult respondents. Of this database, 1.8% were Jews by religion, which translates into about 4.2 million. In order to calculate the percentage of Jews of no religion and children of Jewish affiliation, the researches used the number of Jews by religion as a basis for extrapolation. The ratio between Jews of no religion and Jews by religion

was studied in a separate survey and found to be about 19% by conservative estimates. On this basis, another 900,000 people were added to the total. As for children, the study first calculated the number of Jews in the youngest age group, 18-24, and then deduced similar rates of children in the next (under 18) cohort, adding a further 1.6 million children of Jewish affiliation. Adding up the different groups and the various inferences produced a total count of 6.8 million U.S. Jews. This conclusion, however, is based on numerous calculations and extrapolations, derived from a great number of diverse surveys predicated on varying definitions and with varying levels of rigor. The study's considerable investment and diligence notwithstanding, there are those who argue that its design holds considerable potential for error, either in the survey's execution or in duplicate counts of segments of the population.⁶

The American Jewish Yearbook study employed a methodology similar to that of the Brandeis study, but relied on a different database and a simpler calculation procedure. For a number of years, researchers of the AJY study have collected data from regional surveys across the United States, and these were collated in order to devise a general index of the number of Jews in the country. The researchers' first preference was for professional surveys, which constitute 85% of the study's sources; in certain cases, where the surveyed region was highly populated by Jews (over 90%) or distinguished in some other way from the rest of the public, the authors used national census data. When figures were not available – as in about 15% of the remaining cases – the study relied on

information gathered from Jewish communal bodies, mainly federations, but also synagogues and other Jewish organizations. Contacts within these organizations gave accounts of the Jews in their area and estimated their numbers and levels of affiliation. In some cases, the researchers had to rely on online information sources provided by local organizations' websites without contacting them directly. The incorporation of information from the entire country enabled the researchers to present state-by-state estimates of the number of U.S. Jews, as well as to place their total number at 6.7 million. As in the Brandeis study, the AJY study is problematic in that it draws its conclusions from a wide-ranging and heterogeneous database. Indeed, its authors admit that the true number of U.S. Jews is probably 200,000-500,000 fewer, due to some double counting.

The two studies discussed above involve the broad integration of studies over a relatively short period, whereas DellaPergola's study seeks to draw conclusions from a host of studies conducted over a long period of time, starting from the baseline estimates of the U.S. Jewish population in 1945. The study traces the continuity and consistence of change in the size of the Jewish population, pointing to the remarkable success of studies

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throughout the years in predicting figures a decade in advance. In the process, the study also maps the change-driving factors in operation within the Jewish population – emigration and immigration, fertility and mortality rates, conversions into and out of Judaism, among others – and appraises their impact on its size. Incorporating such data with certain broad trends in American society, such as the ‘Baby Boom’ generation and immigration waves, DellaPergola puts the probable population range of U.S. Jews between 5.2 and 5.6 million,

The Pew study's "net" Jewish population includes respondents who said 1) they were Jews by religion, or 2) those with no other religion who considered themselves Jewish or partly Jewish

and indicates 5.4 million as a reasonable middle point. As in the previous cases, however, this study also raises questions about its potential for recurrent errors, due to the fact that some of the surveys on which its baseline population was predicated have been severely criticized over the years.

Defining who is a Jew

For American Jews, Jewish identity is a complex and occasionally charged topic. Jews in the United States choose from a wide range of Jewish identities that span a variety of definitions. This situation raises a question that every study designed to count the Jewish population must grapple with: Who do we count, and who is

excluded? Despite the complexity, the present cluster of research indicates relative consensus regarding the definition of who is a Jew, at least in principle, and the differences are found mostly in the translation of that definition into a research methodology.

The Pew study included in their "net" Jewish population all respondents who said 1) they were Jews by religion, or 2) alternatively, all those who did not identify as Jewish by religion (that is, identified as "agnostic, atheist or nothing in particular") but have at least one Jewish parent or were raised as a Jew and still considered themselves **"Jewish or partly Jewish** in some way." Those with at least one Jewish parent or who were raised as a Jew but professed membership in another religion were not counted. For children (under 18), the 'net' number included those who lived in a household with one Jewish adult and who were raised at least partially as Jews. Pew researchers used these 'net' definitions in determining the total number of U.S. Jews.

The methodology applied by Brandeis University scholars, as detailed below, produced a more ambiguous definition of who is a Jew. In the first stage, a base population of adults who identify as Jews by religion was established. In addition, the estimate included Jews of no religion. However, because the definition of that group was ambiguous, having been based on a synthesis of several surveys that had defined this segment of the population in differing ways, the Brandeis study does not distinguish between the various circumstances of those who identify as Jews of

no religion (for instance, whether they had a Jewish parent, were raised as Jews, etc.). Further, the study's population estimates of children employed no independent definition, but rather were extrapolated from adult population figures.

The American Jewish Yearbook study also presents a fluid definition of who is a Jew, as it too was not based on primary research. The researchers defined their target population as those who identify as Jews by religion or those of Jewish background not part of another religion and who define themselves as Jewish in some way. The authors do, however, point out that the information on which they based their study comprises many diverse definitions of Jewish identity, some of which may be in contradiction with the desirable definition.

DellaPergola's study argues that the definition of who is a Jew must be more rigorously applied and far less inclusive. He defines the core population of U.S. Jewry as those who say they are Jews by religion, those who say they are Jews of no religion, as well as those who do not define themselves as Jews but still fall within the definition based on descent. DellaPergola's study stresses, however, that in order to be counted according to these definitions, respondents must have an all-encompassing and enduring Jewish identity that is not interchangeable or compatible with contradictory affiliations. According to DellaPergola, it is the varying degrees of rigor in applying such definitions that has produced the significant differences in the final counts and conclusions of the respective studies.

Conclusion

Viewed broadly, differences in Jewish population estimates, and the respective methodologies that produced them, have impeded any attempt to determine a consensual middle ground or deem a specific, superior approach. As far as the definition of the study population and who is considered a countable Jew are concerned, there seems to be general agreement on the inclusion of self-professed Jews by religion as well as those of Jewish background who regard themselves as Jews but are detached from any religion. Nevertheless, the studies also suggest certain disagreements that emerge when such definitions are translated into practical terms. While Pew and DellaPergola adhere strictly to counting only those who meet at least one of the criteria, the American Jewish Yearbook and Brandeis meta-analyses allow for much ambiguity and flexible interpretation as a result of their reliance on diverse and thus inconsistent data sets. The small gaps between the findings of three of the four studies – ranging between 6.7 and 6.8 million Jews, counted in fundamentally different methods – may suggest that this numerical range is the more reliable estimate. Conversely, the studies have failed to explain the contradiction with previous survey results, which have consistently estimated the

The studies indicating a larger Jewish population have failed to explain contradictions with previous survey results

Jewish population as smaller by at least a million people, as indicated by DellaPergola's study. One of the accepted explanations of this gap and of the high estimate of the Jewish population that appears in the most recent surveys relates to outmarriage. According to this explanation, from 1969 on we have witnessed a significant increase of outmarriage, and a concurrent increase in the percentage of children from mixed marriages choosing to identify as Jewish. These processes are thus raising the number of young Jews. (See the discussion on outmarriage and the children of outmarriage in the identity and identification chapter in this Annual Assessment.)

While it may be impossible to settle these issues today, the debate over them and their in-depth exploration highlight both the importance of conducting such surveys and Jewish population estimates, and the need for as much cooperation and consensus as possible over the most appropriate definitions and methods for producing reliable and broadly consensual results.

Endnotes

1. Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013
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3. Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky. 'Jewish Population in the United States, 2013', in Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin (Eds.) *The American Jewish Year Book*, Volume 113 (2013) (Dordrecht: Springer) pp. 201-202; Sheskin, I. M. (2013) 'Uses of Local Jewish Community Study Data for Addressing National Concerns', *Cont Jewry* 33, 83–101.
4. DellaPergola, S. (2013). 'How Many Jews in the United States? The Demographic Perspective', *Cont Jewry* 33, 15–42.
5. Central Bureau of Statistics, *Israel's Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, Number 1/2014.
6. DellaPergola, 'How Many Jews?', 2013.