

A 1990 National Jewish Population Study: Why and How

Sidney Goldstein

At a time when the demographic, social and perhaps even economic structure of the American Jewish community is undergoing rapid change, there is a crucial need for a continuous monitoring of the situation and an assessment of its implications for the future. Changes in size, composition and distribution, as well as in the patterns and levels of births and deaths, have tremendous significance at both the local and national levels. The demographic structure of the Jewish community also greatly affects its social, cultural, and religious viability, whether judged by the composition or by the population density necessary to support an educational system, to organize religious life, or to ensure a sense of community. Knowledge of demographic factors is also clearly essential in order to plan whether a community should provide certain services, where facilities should be located, how they should be staffed, and who should bear the funding burden.

Moreover, to the extent that migration and dispersion are major features of American Jewish life, the viability of both the local and the national community may very well be affected by the success achieved in developing an institutional network that facilitates linkages of mobile Jews to the community, and smaller communities to larger ones, as part of a national community. Because the socio-demographic structure of the national Jewish community, like that of the larger American community, is both a product and a cause of change, we clearly need to have comprehensive, current data available on it, as well as on local communities. The presentation and deliberations at the 1987 Sidney Hollander Colloquium, sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations, stressed the importance of full recognition of the existence of such a national community in our planning and research

efforts. The participants emphasized the need for new methodologies to assess the national society and for new structures and institutions to cope with its evolution.

Because the United States Constitution calls for separation of church and state and thereby prevents the federal government from inquiring into matters of creed, the mandatory decennial census has never included questions on religious identity. In fact, when efforts were initiated by some groups to introduce such a question in the earlier decades of this century, representatives of the Jewish community were among those voicing the strongest objections.

Today, there is greater recognition that religious identification is a key to understanding a host of social, economic, and political behavioral phenomena. As a result, a question on religion is frequently included in sample surveys. I even suspect that, unlike several decades ago, there is much more sentiment for inclusion of a question on religion in the census and less resistance in the Jewish community to doing so. I believe it unlikely, however, that the census will include such a question in the foreseeable future (it definitely will not in 1990) since its general policy is to reduce rather than expand questions that are seen to infringe on private matters; even if such a question were included, I have serious doubts about its value for research and policy purposes. For a variety of reasons, too many Jews may opt not to identify themselves as such; the Jewish origins of persons not currently identifying themselves as Jews would not be ascertained; and the wide range of information on Jewish behavioral and attitudinal variables would not be collected. As a result, the available data would be limited, likely biased in coverage, and possibly misleading and therefore of questionable value. As before, then, to understand ourselves better, we must look to alternative sources of data and particularly to our own efforts to create the types of data we need for assessment and planning purposes.

A variety of alternative data sets are available, but most of these have their own limitations for purposes of an analysis of U.S. Jewry. For most states, birth, death, and marriage records, like the census, collect no information on religion. Nor do school censuses or such widespread listings of households and population as telephone and city directories. Their use, at best, can only be indirect by reliance on distinctive Jewish names (a questionable procedure because of potential bias (Lazerwitz, 1986) or by linkage with survey materials in which known Jews are included. The best alternatives are surveys in which information of religious identification is collected. Three types of such surveys are relevant to our concern: 1) national and local omnibus surveys; 2) local

studies of the Jewish population; and 3) a national Jewish population survey.

National or local surveys are designed to represent the general population and, as a result, also include Jews. Such studies are frequently undertaken by marketing or public opinion organizations. But because Jews constitute only about 2.5 percent of the American population, and because such surveys seldom exceed 2,500 respondents, the number of Jews included in any single national survey is very small (Fisher, 1983); Jews seldom exceed 40 to 50 cases in such national omnibus surveys. An exception was the 1957 Current Population Survey sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1958) which sampled about 35,000 households and which, because of its voluntary character, was able to include a question on religion on an experimental basis. Based on the 2.2 percent of the population identified as Jews, the Jewish sub-sample must have numbered about 1,100 cases, thereby allowing separate, detailed analysis. Regrettably, very few data were tabulated, and the raw data have never been made available for further analysis. A question on religion has never been repeated in a CPS.

For smaller surveys that are taken repeatedly, the results of several surveys can be combined. A considerable number of such surveys may be required, however, to achieve the minimum number of Jews needed for a meaningful analysis. Furthermore, the changes in behavior and attitudes that could occur over the span of years encompassed by a combined sample could make the Jewish sample too heterogeneous for reliable analysis.

Local communities have increasingly recognized that if meeting service needs and planning for the future are to be effective, they must be based on comprehensive, accurate assessments of the population. Individual communities have therefore turned increasingly to the community population survey as a source of information for self-evaluation and planning. Since 1980, about 45 such studies have been initiated. As a result, about three-fourths of the total Jewish American population has been surveyed. Some communities have already surveyed themselves twice and a few, like Boston, have done so three times. Through these surveys, we know more than ever about ourselves.

Yet our knowledge is incomplete. In part, this is because we have not yet fully developed standardized procedures for asking questions, and for tabulating and analyzing the survey data. In part, it reflects the variation in sampling designs that are used. Some surveys rely exclusively or heavily on lists of families known to the local

federations, and these tend to be strongly biased in favor of those who contribute to fund-raising efforts or are otherwise closely identified with the community. In others, and fortunately a growing number, efforts are made to obtain a fully representative sample by reliance on random selection from within the larger community. This heterogeneity in approaches makes it still difficult and sometimes impossible to compare results across communities, either to get a better understanding of a particular community or to obtain insights into the national American Jewish community. Concerted efforts to correct this situation are in process through the activities of the Federation-sponsored National Technical Advisory Committee on Population Studies (NTAC) and the North American Jewish Data Bank (NAJDB) (Goldstein, 1985).

While standardization of concepts and methods will go far in allowing better assessment of both the local and the national situation, it will still fall short of fully meeting the needs of a comprehensive assessment of the national situation. Not all communities undertake studies or do so within the same period of time. As a result, gaps still exist in our knowledge of the situation in medium and small size communities and of the effect of regional location. Also, to the extent that the situation in Jewish communities is a dynamic one, it may be misleading to compare or to aggregate communities whose surveys were undertaken more than a few years apart. Moreover, the key role that migration plays in affecting local characteristics, as well as the national distribution, requires national data with information covering both in- and out-migration from different types of communities.

To rely on data from individual surveys gives only a one-sided picture; such surveys encompass only those living in the community at the time of the survey and therefore provide no information on how many and which types have left, where they have gone, or whether they are likely to return. The great advantage of the U.S. decennial census is that it concurrently serves the needs of both the national society and the multiplicity of local communities. A national profile of American surveys would serve similar purposes.

Recognizing the need for a national overview, the Council of Jewish Federations in 1970/71 undertook the National Jewish Population Study (NJPS). This was an ambitious important, and promising attempt to conduct a nationwide survey that would be fully representative of the United States Jewish population. As a report in the 1973 *American Jewish Year Book* (AJYB) indicated, the resulting data “constitute a repository of information that will require ‘mining’ and interpretation for years to come” (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973). The NJPS remains

largely just that – a repository. To date, comparatively few published reports, limited largely to the number and basic characteristics of the Jewish population, have been prepared, based on NJPS data.

NJPS undoubtedly represents a milestone in the development of Jewish demography in the United States, and the comparatively small number of analyses that were undertaken of its data have yielded important insights into the dynamics of population change (e.g., DellaPergola, 1980; Goldstein, 1982; Lazerwitz, 1978). It is also clear that it did not achieve its full potential through fuller tabulation and analysis of the most comprehensive set of data yet collected on American Jewry as a whole. Any future comparable effort must be certain to provide for fuller and more expeditious exploitation of the data.

In the absence of another NJPS, given the keen recognition of the need for national assessments of the Jewish population, individual groups and scholars have attempted to develop national samples. Steven Cohen has been in the forefront of such efforts with the studies he has undertaken for the American Jewish Committee. A number of these surveys (Cohen, 1983a, 1983b, 1985) have employed samples based on distinctive Jewish names listed in telephone directories. These names had been identified earlier from lists of persons affiliated with a wide range of Jewish organizations or activities. Whether a national sample based on such lists of strongly identified and affiliated Jews constitutes a reliable source for a representative sample of the entire American-Jewish population and especially of those at or near the margins of the community remains questionable (Goldstein, 1985). Cohen (1987) himself recognizes this danger, especially for studies that require sensitive measures, but argues that such samples are acceptable in research that attempts to delineate only broad differences or changes in attitudes or characteristics, as in the political arena.

In the more recent surveys, a stronger effort has been made to achieve less biased representation by relying on a different base for developing the sample. A Consumer Mail Panel of 200,000 households developed by a marketing and survey research firm contained 4,700 households which had been identified earlier as containing at least one member reported as currently Jewish. From the total 200,000 sample, a demographically balanced subsample (based on region, income, population density, age and household size) was developed containing over 2,000 Jewish households. A mail-out sample of 1,699 households was drawn from this group. The data collected suggest that this sample “succeeded in reaching a slightly larger number of marginally Jewish

respondents" than did earlier samples based on distinctive Jewish names (Cohen, 1987).

The new sample overrepresented those with a college education, and underrepresented those with only high school and people in their 20s, especially those under 25. It also underrepresented Orthodox households. Thus, while overcoming some of the concerns associated with use of DJNs, this sampling approach, particularly given the self-selective character of participants in the panel, gives rise to new concerns. As Cohen (1987:91) stresses, "there is no completely satisfactory way to sample American Jews nationwide, and no single method yields a representative group at a reasonable cost." This presents a major challenge to any effort to undertake a national survey.

Nevertheless, any future national survey that is undertaken will benefit immensely by the vast improvements in sampling and survey procedures that have occurred since the 1970/71 NJPS was undertaken and by the experience gained from the large number of Jewish community surveys completed since then, as well as from other more limited efforts to collect national data. Moreover, the much stronger professional credentials in recent years of the planning and research staffs of local agencies, the CJF, and other national agencies means that there is both a greater appreciation of the need for data of high scientific quality and a far greater potential for knowing how to use such data effectively for research and planning purposes.

Based on both our experience with community studies and our recognition that, in fact, a national Jewish community has evolved in the United States that requires national assessment, a strong case exists for undertaking, around 1990 and on a regular basis thereafter, a national survey of the Jewish population. Such a national profile is essential for planning by national Jewish organizations. It is also crucial for use by individual communities as a standard against which to measure their own populations so as to better understand the dynamics of local change, the ways in which the local structure helps to explain unique features of the local community, and the directions in which the local community may change as indicated by developments on the national scene.

Such a national profile is also essential in any assessment of the position of Jews worldwide and in evaluating concerns expressed about future growth patterns of the American and the world's Jewish population. The results of such a national survey would provide the foundation for research and for formulation and evaluation of policies to cope with the demographic challenges faced locally, nationally, and

internationally, particularly in areas of concern related to the strength of Jewish identity and the vitality of the community.)

A national survey gives rise, of course, to an infinite number of concerns related to sample design, questionnaire contents, tabulations and analysis plans, relation of the national survey to community surveys, and financing. These can be touched on only briefly here.

Given its purpose, a national sample clearly has to encompass communities of all sizes, from large through small cities down to small towns, and ideally even to isolated Jews. A major goal therefore has to be to cover Jews operating in the core of the community as well as those at its very margins, as judged by degree of identification. This presents major challenges with respect to how the universe to be sampled can be identified. Lists of identified Jews can be used only as a starting point, and their use will probably have to be restricted to the largest communities accounting for the dominant part of the U.S. Jewish population (Waksberg, 1987). A combined list-RDD (random digit dialing) would be used in these heavily Jewish areas to take advantage of the lists, and to ensure concurrent coverage of non-list Jews. For the balance of the United States, exclusive reliance on RDD seems in order, to provide coverage in the aggregate for less densely populated Jewish communities and isolated Jews. However, RDD would require tens of thousands of calls to produce a representative sample of Jewish households, given the small percentage of Jews in the population.

The NTAC of CJF has already drafted a core questionnaire to serve as a standard instrument in community surveys; it can also serve as a core for a national survey. It represents the consensus of a group of experts (scholars and planners) on the basic data needed to undertake assessment of the population and, through standard wording, to pursue comparative evaluations with census data and across communities. Individual communities and any national survey are, of course, free to add to the core in directions dictated by their own data needs. This core encompasses the range of census-type questions related to age, sex, household relations, marriage/divorce, fertility, labor force, education, income, and migration. It also includes items related to Jewish identification and behavior: Jewish education, religious practices, intermarriage and conversion, organization/synagogue membership, philanthropy, ties to Israel. The core, which is estimated to require 30–35 minutes to administer by telephone, should serve excellently as the basis of a national survey questionnaire. It covers the key socio-demographic concerns and, by its standardized character, would provide national data with which the information collected in

individual communities can be compared, once such communities adopt use of the "core questionnaire". (A number have already used questions identical or quite similar to those proposed for the core.)

The creation by CJF and the effective functioning of the North American Jewish Data Bank and the National Technical Advisory Committee on Population Studies augurs well for the success of any effort to undertake a National Population Study. The committee, consisting of leading scholars and planners concerned with the Jewish population, provides a reservoir of expertise for the design of a national study and a pool of committed scholars who are prepared to undertake analysis of the resulting data, partly through an overview assessment of the study population and partly through a series of monographs focussing on particular aspects of the demographic features and the Jewish identification of the population.

The Data Bank has already gained considerable experience in the collection of data sets from individual communities, in enhancing their comparability, and in their use in comparative analysis. Its staff have cooperated closely with members of NTAC in developing the core questionnaire and can be counted upon to support all efforts to launch and successfully complete a national survey.

Execution of a survey in or about 1990 has the particular advantage of enhancing the value of the survey results by allowing maximum comparability in contents and timing with the data from the 1990 federal decennial census. The core questionnaire already resembles the census in areas of overlapping concern. Calvin Goldscheider (1983) has argued strongly for the need to assess the Jewish population in comparison with non-Jews in the community of which they are a part in order to provide us with a standard against which to measure the structure and dynamics of the Jewish population. Simultaneous or near-simultaneous execution of a national survey and the census provides an opportunity to do so, and at no additional cost to the Jewish study.

Such simultaneity may be particularly important for local communities, where the number of cases covered by the census is adequate to allow comparisons. It might otherwise be difficult to fund a special non-Jewish survey large enough to permit meaningful comparisons. Still another argument favoring a survey in 1990 is that the 20 years between it and JNPS would serve as a good interval for assessing basic changes in the characteristics of the national population. Scheduling the survey in 1990 also contributes to regularizing such a survey by enhancing the likelihood that it will be taken concurrent with succeeding decennial censuses.

A final point favoring a survey in 1990 is that internationally, most countries conduct their national censuses around that year. If, in turn, national Jewish surveys worldwide took place at about the same time, comparability would be ensured not only with the respective censuses in each country, but internationally with other surveys of Jewish populations.

It must be stressed that a national survey does not preclude conducting community surveys concurrently. To the contrary, two strong arguments can be cited for doing so: 1) As Waksberg (1987) has pointed out, although we cannot rely exclusively on local studies to produce national statistics due to the selective omission of smaller places and rural areas from the roster of community studies, a plausible statistical system might cumulate the sample data for a group of communities and conduct a national sample survey in the balance of the country. Integrating local surveys and the national survey in this way is feasible and, in fact, could be quite economical since it would require a smaller national sample. Standardization (comparability) in sample design and in core questionnaire contents would, of course, be essential, as would assurance that the local data would be available for integrated use with the national survey materials. Coordination would be a key to the success of such an approach.

2) Simultaneity and comparability of a national survey and a series of community surveys would enhance the value of both for assessment of the Jewish American population. It would allow the cooperating communities to assess themselves more meaningfully in the context of the national community and to compare themselves with the concurrent situation in other communities of different or similar size and regional location. At the same time, it would add depth to the national assessment by allowing attention to intercommunity variations that would be masked in a national sample that is necessarily too small to allow breakdowns for individual communities, except perhaps the very largest. To understand how migration, city size, regional location, and other factors affect demographic structure and dynamics as well as Jewish identity requires information on a more local level. A national survey in conjunction with local surveys in a number of communities offers the best opportunity for such complementary analysis.

While no estimates of the cost of a national survey have been prepared, the general consensus is that, overlooking the costs of any local community surveys undertaken concurrently, a national survey can cost considerably less than did NJPS in 1970. The costs will, of course, reflect the size of the national sample and the sampling procedure used in selecting it. Initial discussions have suggested that a

national sample of 2,000 would be adequate; this could be reduced somewhat if local studies are integrated, although needs for cross-tabulations by city size and region may argue against this. A national sample of 2,000 is not much greater, and in a few instances smaller, than samples recently employed by individual communities. If the costs to communities is roughly indicative of what a national survey would cost, a very preliminary estimate is that a budget of about \$500,000 may suffice to cover the data collection, tabulation, and analysis. A larger sample to allow separate regional and metropolitan analyses would, of course, raise the costs. This assumes, too, that members of both NTAC and NAJDB will be committed to sharing their expertise at key stages of the research process.

Preliminary discussions anticipate that a number of experts are prepared to participate in the organization of a national survey in the expectation that, in turn, they will have access to the resulting data for analytic studies in their particular sphere of interest (e.g., the family, fertility, migration, Jewish identity, philanthropy). A series of monographs covering these major areas of scholarly and planning interests are envisaged as the end product, with the initial analysis of the data to be used as input to the summary report to be prepared for the community at large. Of course, the data tapes will be available upon completion of the survey for use by local communities, by national organizations, and by graduate students pursuing dissertation research on the Jewish population.

From where are the funds of the study to come? A major source will have to be CJF, as the umbrella organization for the local federations for whom the data are largely intended. Many other national organizations have pressing need for reliable and current information of the national population and on intercity and interregional variations. Among these are the American Jewish Committee, B'nai Brith, Hillel, Hadassah, and the various synagogue/temple associations. It seems reasonable to expect that each would contribute an appropriate amount and that, in fact, the study would be sponsored by a consortium of such groups. Some of the groups (e.g., AJC) already sponsor a series of national surveys although their coverage, as indicated earlier, may not be as representative of the national population as that anticipated for the proposed study. If for no other reason, it would be in the interests of such groups to co-sponsor this umbrella survey to obtain baseline data by which to judge the representativeness of their own samples. Beyond this, the resulting analyses should provide insights that will prove valuable to the co-sponsoring groups in assessing programs and planning the future, especially if an opportunity is provided to include

a few questions of special interest to the collaborating agencies.

In sum, a national perspective is clearly essential in both research and planning. Only by recognizing the key role that has been assumed by the national community and the ways it interacts with and complements the local communities will we enhance the likelihood that national and local agencies will achieve maximum effectiveness in serving the needs of the population, in strengthening the community as a whole, and in ensuring its future by providing a firmer, more realistic basis on which to plan. To achieve this goal requires a national population survey at the same time as we continue our efforts to assess and plan for local surveys. Together, the insights gained from the local and national studies will help assure the continued vitality of the community as a whole and of its component parts.

References

- Cohen, Steven. 1983a. "The 1981-82 National Survey of American Jews," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 83. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, pp. 89-110.
- Cohen, Steven. 1983b. *Attitudes of American Jews Toward Israel and Israelis: The 1983 National Survey of American Jews and Jewish Communal Leaders*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Cohen, Steven. 1985. *The 1984 National Survey of American Jews: Political and Social Outlooks*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Cohen, Steven. 1987. *Ties and Tensions; The 1986 Survey of American Jewish Attitudes Toward Israel and Israelis*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- DellaPergola, Sergio. 1980 "Patterns of American Jewish Fertility," *Demography*, 17 (August), pp. 261-273.
- Fisher, Alan M. 1983. "The National Gallup Polls and American Jewish Demography," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 83. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, pp. 111-126.
- Goldscheider, Calvin. 1984. "Including Non-Jews in Jewish Community Samples: Substantive and Methodological Issues," in: *Perspectives in Jewish Population Research*, Steven Cohen, Jonathan Woocher, and Bruce Philips, Eds. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 107-117.
- Goldstein, Sidney. 1982. "Population Movement and Redistribution Among American Jews," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 24 (June), pp. 5-23.
- Goldstein, Sidney. 1985. "American Jewish Demography: Inconsistencies that Challenge." Paper presented at the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem.
- Goldstein, Sidney. 1987. "The Role and Work of the North American Jewish Data Bank," Occasional Papers No. 3. New York: North American Jewish Data Bank, pp. 3-10.

- Lazerwitz, Bernard. 1978. "An Estimate of a Rare Population Group – the U.S. Jewish Population," *Demography*, 15, pp. 389–394.
- Lazerwitz, Bernard. 1986. "Some Comments on the Use of Distinctive Jewish Names in Surveys," *Contemporary Jewry*, 7, pp. 83–91.
- Massarik, Fred, and Alvin Chenkin. 1973. "United States National Jewish Population Survey: A First Report," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 73. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society pp. 264–306.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1958. "Religion Reported by the Civilian Population of the United States, 1957," *Current Population Reports*, Series P–20, No. 79. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Waksberg, Joseph. 1987. "Considerations in Developing a Design for a National Survey of the Jewish Population." Unpublished memorandum to NTAC.