

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT U.S. JEWISH POPULATIONS Retrospect and Prospect 1970–2001

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In this article, the scientific director of the 1970 National Jewish Population Study comments on the political factors that affect Jewish demographic research and compares that study to the 1990 NJPS. Although large-scale surveys are a key tool for understanding Jewish populations, deeply probing interviews and ethnographic methods are also important research methodologies for obtaining in-depth knowledge about the American Jewish community today.

Quite some years ago, Robert Lynd (1939), an influential sociologist, wrote a widely cited treatise with the intriguing title, *Knowledge for What?* The significance of this query has not gone away over the years and applies with special force today as we consider the study of Jewish populations in the United States and its occasionally contentious history. As is well known, the doctrine of separation between church and state makes impossible the inclusion of a “religion” question or anything like it in the U.S. decennial Census. And, indeed, the Census, as well as inquiries into the numbers and characteristics of the U.S. Jewish population, are all embedded in salient sociopolitical contexts, which place direct powerful constraints on the kind and scope of data collection—financial limitations obviously affect sample size, interviewing methods, and the like—and the eventual use and interpretation of the findings. Beyond the question, *Knowledge for what?*, we need to ask: *Knowledge for whom and to what ends?* The answers are not necessarily self-evident.

Use of one kind or another does, of course, motivate this kind of demographic research. Whatever its contribution to fundamental understanding of important phenomena, the guiding beacon of ultimate effective application remains paramount.

For instance, in commenting on the

1990 National Jewish Population Survey (1990 NJPS), Martin S. Kraar, executive vice-president of the Council of Jewish Federations, the sponsoring agency of both the 1970 and 1990 studies, notes that the 1990 NJPS data “would be further analyzed to determine how 200 Jewish federations in communities throughout North America can better deploy resources to meet the needs of the Jewish community.” Fair enough—hopeful statements of this kind are necessary preambles both in study inception and at completion.

In like context, the prospectus for the 1970 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) entitled, “*Toward a National Study of Jewish Population: A Proposal (1965)*,” contains this statement: the 1970 NJPS “is to be regarded as a ‘data bank’ or as a ‘barrel of information’ that can be analyzed and reanalyzed within reasonable limits to provide answers to specific planning questions . . . (even) after the formal report . . . has been completed.”

It is the case, however, that such analysis, and reanalysis, grows from and is performed within a complex social framework that is based on implicit and explicit assumptions about what is important by way of research design and method. Such an analysis is also done within the matrix of community power structure. With apologies to John Donne, “No study is an island.”

The 1970 NJPS prospectus further states,

Any study is no better than the data it provides and the community process that is developed to transform these data into concrete community policy and action. To be effective, a national study of Jewish population must be developed in close liaison with the leadership of the organized . . . Jewish community, and with full understanding of what facts alone can — and cannot — accomplish. (Surely, facts never speak for themselves, but require always the enlightened interpretation of the members and leaders of the community.)

The dual issues of *method* (including all aspects of study design), and *community response* (with its power realities and human frailties) came together, sometimes with disturbing consequences. Several examples of the community response to the 1970 NJPS illustrate the impact of the community power structure on research efforts.

POLITICS OF RESEARCH

“Say It Isn’t So . . .”

As the 1970 NJPS neared its conclusion, it became apparent to the researchers, and to some others interested in its initial findings, that a very large Eastern metropolitan community (a self-representing primary sampling unit, to use the then-current technical term) had been losing Jewish population in massive numbers. To those of us close to the data this was not a surprising finding; preliminary estimates before the sampling study was undertaken had been harbingers of this trend. As the hard data confirmed the dramatic decline in Jewish population numbers in this geographic area, meetings were arranged with the lay and professional Jewish community leadership of the area affected to review the findings. To use a concept from another discipline, we found the leadership “in denial.”

What followed can be further described in terms of pathology. Although this de-

cline surely could not have gone unnoticed by the leaders, their persistent public posture was “It can’t be so!” or, at least, “Say it isn’t so!”

Further exploration brought to light an interesting assumption underlying this vociferous denial. Several of the community leaders provided something of a rationale for their position, which might be paraphrased as follows:

If you (the researchers) are right and we in this area really are losing Jewish population as you say, well then the Jewish community is going to be losing its political clout! And this must not happen, so we must prove that you — the researchers — are wrong.

Unfortunately, the matter was not permitted to rest there, as an episode of internal dialogue. So strong were the Jewish community leaders’ feelings and convictions — whether based on reason, emotion, or assessment of possibly threatening political implications — that they challenged the methodology of the 1970 NJPS. “The data must be wrong,” they persisted. “The research design and method must be wrong.”

The leaders then retained, with a further commitment of community resources, time, and money, a distinguished senior sociologist to re-study the 1970 NJPS method and design for the country as a whole and for their particular metropolitan community. After nearly a year of effort, the reviewing sociologist confirmed both the appropriateness of the 1970 NJPS method and design and the resulting findings, including the significant decline in Jewish population that gave rise to the controversy in the first place. By then, considerable energy had been diverted to a substantial, intellectually interesting, but also unproductive process — energy that could have been focused, by research staff and community leadership, on useful service-oriented analysis of data to enhance much-needed community planning.

"Please . . . Please . . . Can't We Subtract a Few?"

The 1970 NJPS was so designed that Jewish population estimates of selected large communities could be obtained, especially for some larger communities that worked out "tie-in" arrangements with the national study, supplementing the overall proportional sample by additional local interviews. In this manner, a population estimate was obtained for one large Midwest community. It was found that Jewish population numbers were *greater* than expected by that area's leadership, which provoked some unhappiness. The community prided itself on its high per person/per household ratio of giving to the annual federation campaign. Naturally if the total number of Jewish households/Jewish persons goes up, that ratio goes down; the higher the Jewish population estimate, the lower the resulting per capita contribution.

Fortunately, the population estimates were accepted and indeed constructively influenced the community's fund-raising strategy for some years to come.

The Semantics of Population Change

Statisticians and others who must interpret data, not only in numeric terms but verbally as well, are conscious of the "as much as/only" semantic trap. Assume for a moment that some hypothetical community shows an intermarriage rate (however defined) of 35%. Now it may turn out that an equally hypothetical interpreter of this figure may observe that this rate is *only* 35% as compared to a national figure of 52%. Or, to the contrary, another observer, one who is deeply committed to in-marriage among Jewish partners, can lament that the intermarriage rate is *as much as* or *as high as* 35%. What you see depends on where you stand. Another example is the impact of intermarriage on Jewish survival, which is much more complicated than a simplistic

analysis would suggest. One could examine the relative balance of converts into Judaism, for instance, compared to converts out of Judaism. Because intermarriage increases the number of marriages involving at least one Jewish partner, one could analyze the effects of this increase on the eventual number of children born and total Jewish population figures. Neither the statistics nor the nature of Jewish life hold still for us, nor do facts emerge in pristine simplicity.

When interpreting Jewish population numbers in a community in which there had been little change in this regard, the "stagnant-static-stable" labeling scheme was involved prominently. Those who wished to limit certain services argued, "Let's cut back: this is a *stagnant* community." Those who wanted to hold the line, suggesting neither expansion nor reduction, maintained, "Let's face it . . . this community is *static*. . . . It's 'no growth,' let's keep things as they are." And finally those whose views tilted toward eventual expansion of services proposed, "We agree. There's not been much growth; but that just means that this is a *stable community*, and we must build on this stability and be ready for growth when it comes."

In addition to semantics, there is the problem of simple or purposive misunderstanding of the research process. For example, a very large East Coast community had anticipated that a certain substantial number of interviews in the data collection phase of the 1970 NJPS would be conducted with Jewish households in its area, based on its historic, high Jewish population numbers. However, because of recent population losses in that community, the probability sampling procedures/fieldwork of the 1970 NJPS yielded a much lower number of interviews. Yet, the study sponsor, through its executive office, had made a promise to the leadership of this East Coast community that a much higher number of interviews would be conducted there. The study sponsor then insisted that a mail questionnaire survey be "tagged

on" to the basic probability sample design, to make up the shortfall in interviews. This was done, once again with a significant cost and resource allocation.

CONSIDERING NJPS RESEARCH STRATEGY: 1970 AND 1990

The above examples illustrate that assumptions and values held by the consumers of research data affect interpretation of that data and thence the community planning process. Yet, research design itself is unavoidably enmeshed in a social, political, and economic matrix.

Factors that affect the usefulness of the data for planning purposes are the number of study cases available for analysis (assuming that the sample is representative), the amount of information in the questionnaire or interview and the quality of fieldwork. The number of cases is particularly important, not just as a means for assuring accuracy or levels of confidence but also by providing planners with a richer basis for refined analysis that focuses on specific client groups and geographic areas.

In terms of research strategy, the 1970 NJPS and the 1990 NJPS differ materially. This difference is not, of course, simply a matter of whim; that which was possible in 1970 was not equally possible in 1990, and vice versa.

Personal versus Telephone Interviews

The 1970 NJPS was a "door-step" personal interview survey, with the exception of some follow-up and coverage of geographic areas with very sparse Jewish population, in which very extensive telephone interviews were conducted. For the door-step personal interview phase, the average interview lasted about 90 minutes, providing an opportunity for intensive coverage of the widest range of topics relevant for social agency and communal planning. Including "tie-in" communities that coordinated local area studies with the national survey, the 1970

NJPS reached some 7,500 households, each including one or more Jewish persons.¹

Every geographic region of the United States was represented in the sample design. Individual interviews were weighted appropriately in accordance with a procedure involving a stratified probability sample. The 1970 NJPS was committed to reaching the widest, most representative cross-section of the U.S. Jewish population (including households involving intermarriage and non-Jewish members) possible at the time. The response rate for households rarely fell below 75% and normally exceeded 85% because of numerous call-backs and intensive follow-up.

In contrast, the 1990 NJPS made use of a procedure popularly known as random digit dialing (RDD), involving phone calls, rather than "door-step" personal interviews. A screening sample of 125,813 households, following a number of intermediate steps, yielded a final sample of 2,441 households; these constitute the essential data base of the 1990 NJPS.

Clearly, operational research strategies are significantly different in 1990 than in 1970. Twenty years ago, it was still possible to mount large door-to-door personal interview surveys. Changing social conditions, fear of strangers and mistrust, and geographic dispersion make such survey approaches, especially as they must contact households in a wide variety of neighborhoods, risky and inevitably quite costly. With careful study design and effective selection and training of interviewers, they are, however, still doable.

¹ In this article, for ease of exposition, the terms "Jewish," "Jewish households," "households including one or more Jewish persons," etc. are used without explicit rigorous definition. Both the 1970 NJPS and the 1990 NJPS acknowledge and specifically address the distinctions, which indeed are critical for a clear understanding of the character of Jewish population estimates and the nature of contemporary Jewish life. The following served as associate scientific directors of the 1970 NJPS: Morris Axelrod, Stanley K. Bigman, Alvin Chenkin, Sidney Goldstein, Saul Kaplan, Bernard Lazerwitz, and Albert J. Mayer.

As a researcher with a continuing commitment to social work and psychology, I still believe that face-to-face contact is a powerful means of social and therapeutic intervention, as well as a superior method of survey data collection. RDD is in widespread current use because the telephone has major appeal as an instrument for data collection. It is handy, convenient, and permits wide-area coverage. Yet, RDD is not the only method of data collection (recollect the vagaries of answering machines, voice mail, and refusals to respond in defense against telephone solicitations). Even in today's era of hi-tech development, it is important to get back to basics: people in one another's physical presence talking to each other, about things that matter. Buber's (1965) "I and Thou" still makes a difference.

Topics Covered by the 1970 NJPS

Both the 1970 and the 1990 NJPS address vast arrays of topics—demographic, sociological, and attitudinal. As a starting point for comparative analysis between the two surveys, the major topic categories of the 1970 NJPS are listed below:

- Definition of Jewishness
- Family background
- Religion
- Jewish education
- Organizations and involvement
- Marriage and children
- Mobility and housing
- Community involvement
- Education and labor force status
- Estimation of vital rates: births, deaths, marriages, and divorces
- Attitudes toward Jewishness: 20-page questionnaire
- Income and contributions to philanthropic campaigns

Taking the approximate length of each interview—1.5 hours—and multiplying that by about 7,500 interviews yields the

figure of 11,250 hours of dialogue in households including one or more Jewish persons that are available to researchers and historians from the 1970 NJPS. This is quite a considerable conversation with the U.S. Jewish population of the 1970s.

CJF subsequently published 1970 NJPS follow-up reports on the following topics: Inter-marriage, the Jewish Aging, Jewish Education, Demographic Highlights, National and Regional Population Counts, and Methodology.

Small Areas and Large Data Bases

It is obvious that, if money were no object, researchers would be able to create large data bases for small areas. Yet, even with financial constraints, there are numerous models of social inquiry available, and researchers and planners need not be locked into any one of them. Nor need they argue that one and only one of these models is "scientific." A broader vision and a new disciplined eclecticism need to be called upon to address effectively the research and social planning challenges of the 1990s.

The 1970 NJPS made use of a particular approach, notably in the design phase but in the planning contexts as well: the indicator or index method. Our colleagues in economics and finance, for example, use indexes of all kinds—the GNP, CPI, Dow-Jones, to name but a few, relating to the gross national product, consumer prices, and stock market performance. None of these indexes is a direct representation of circumstances; all share in common the intent of providing an indication of an underlying set of conditions. Indexes are not really a form of probability sampling, but rather of constructing a credible measure for something that is significant and of widespread interest.

In the 1970 NJPS, the Distinctive Jewish Names Index (DJNI) was employed on a large-scale basis to design an effective national sample. The DJNI, consisting of a list of 106 surnames empirically tested as

frequently found in Jewish populations, provides an indication of likelihood that Jewish households (per survey definition) would indeed be located in a given geographic area. This index helped us locate "Jewish areas" so that sampling could be guided accordingly; it told us where to focus our fieldwork efforts and how to take account of both dense and sparse Jewish population areas (such as census tracts or zip codes) when committing resources for fieldwork/interviewing. Any use of the DJNI is preliminary only, as it only indicates roughly what to expect in a given "target" area and helps lay the groundwork for the next steps in the research process, such as more efficient and cost-effective sampling.

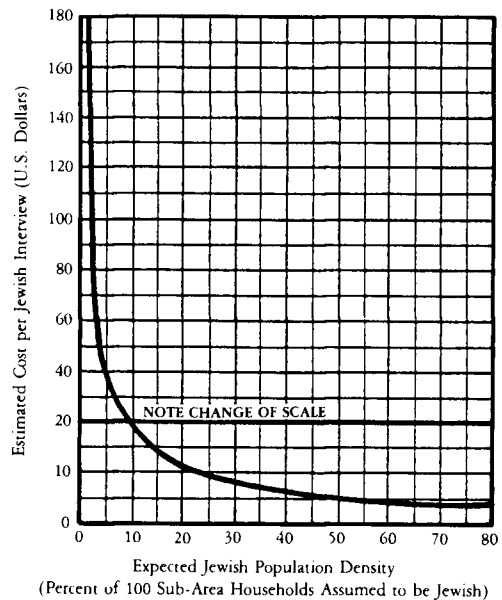
Use of the DJNI can reduce significantly the costs of data collection. The inverse relationship between the per interview cost and Jewish population density is shown dramatically in Figure 1, which is based on a Jewish population study of Los Angeles in 1964-65. Predictions concerning expected Jewish population (household) density drastically reduce fieldwork costs, although costs for preparing the estimates need to be taken into account as well. The data collected through such fieldwork should facilitate more effective and pinpointed community planning.

Surveys and Deeply Probing Interviews

Large-scale surveys continue to hold a central position as tools for understanding Jewish populations, in broad scope and panoramic vision. Yet, although they are a central method, they are not the only legitimate method. Deeply probing interviewing and ethnographic methods, which certainly have been used in earlier research on Jewish life, need to come to the fore increasingly, especially in these days of RDD prominence.

Intensive qualitative insights are urgently needed—beyond anecdotal and case reports—as augmentation of more mechanical RDD-based procedures. Indeed, with suit-

Figure 1. Projected interview cost function—Jewish population study, Los Angeles, California 1964-1965



able design economies achieved by the use of DJNI, other indexes, and the like, even larger-scale intensive interview studies can be designed. Such studies have not yet been conducted, but they could provide in-depth knowledge about critically important population groups, such as various constellations of intermarriage, the "intermarriage-prone," the aged, and campaign non-givers, to mention a few.

DO WE REALLY WANT TO KNOW?

The examples of leadership in Jewish communities not wishing to accept the 1970 NJPS findings lead me to wonder, "Do we really want to know?" And what does it take before we are willing to believe some unexpected or unwanted truths?

To make better use of what we know, we need to rethink and recast the decision-making process of our federations toward heightened openness and realism. We also need to move systematically toward multi-method approaches in research, toward the increased use of indexes, as contrasted with one-stratum surveys, or of any one

approach to the exclusion of others. And, in addition to the now-current and desirable Data Bank concept, we need to develop and institute regular intercensal NJPSs, under CJF or other sponsorship, to keep up with the dynamic changes in the U.S. Jewish population in the 1990s.

Let us start the planning and design process, for NJPS 1995, and then let us look ahead to NJPS 2000, or even 2001!

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