

WHY IS THIS CITY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER CITIES? New York and the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey

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Findings from the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study, which used the same sampling and screening methodology as the NJPS, indicate that Jewish life in the New York City area differs significantly from American Jewish life elsewhere—it is at least 15 years behind the national intermarriage trends, and there is a much higher Jewish identification rate among New York Jews. It is argued that New York provides a different context for religion and ethnicity, in which Jewishness is a social category of consequence, over and above the private lives of the individual Jews who live there.

The American Jewish community has been shaken by the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), which may be summed up as “Jews being killed by the kindness of American society.” We are not certain whether the first portrait of the New York City area presented here will make the reader feel better or worse. Drawing on preliminary findings from the UJA-Federation 1991 New York Jewish Population Study (NYJPS), we suggest that Jewish life in the New York City area differs significantly from American Jewish life elsewhere—that it is at least 15 years behind the national intermarriage trends and that New York City itself seems to offer some protection from the “scourge” of assimilation. Thus, we pose the question: How and why does Jewish life in New York differ from Jewish life in the rest of the United States?

The question we pose is a large one, and this article is a first effort at examining the

basic factors at work in producing that difference. We are especially interested in the interaction and interconnections between the Jewish population and the larger American society. Our exploration starts with a comparison of the population profiles of New York Jews and Jews nationwide; we then proceed to consider some measures of interaction or “boundary relations” between Jews and non-Jews in terms of household composition and intermarriage in New York and nationally.

METHODOLOGY

The 1991 NYJPS was designed to provide a high-quality map or profile of the largest urban Jewish population in the world. A random representative sample of 4,006 Jewish households was identified through a screening and interviewing process whereby more than 35,000 New York area residences in New York City, Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties were contacted by telephone to locate Jewishly connected households—households containing at least one person who currently or previously was Jewish. The telephone numbers were drawn

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using a random digit dial method that does not rely on any existing list of published phone numbers or on "distinctive Jewish names." All residential phone numbers, both listed and unlisted, had an equal chance of being included in the sample.

The sampling and interviewing were conducted by ICR Survey Research Group of Media, PA, a nationally well-reputed company that conducted the telephone polls for the Council of Jewish Federation's 1990 National Jewish Population Survey.

Once a Jewishly connected household was identified as part of the screening process, an interview was conducted with a Jewishly connected adult in that household. The interview, averaging 30 minutes in length, was conducted in English, or in Russian, Yiddish or Spanish, as needed, so as to avoid bias against non-English speakers. The screening and interviewing phase began November 15, 1990 and was completed on May 8, 1991.

The "response rate," which measures the willingness of potential respondents to participate in the telephone screening process, was 57%, which by market research standards is very good, particularly given the sensitive nature of the questions in our study. Among Jewish respondents the willingness to be interviewed after they had been screened was 70%.

The telephone sample yielded 4,006 qualified Jewishly connected households, containing 10,501 individuals. The household and population estimates reported below are based on a scientific weighing of two samples: the Jewishly connected sample of 4,006 households, and a subsample of one-quarter of the non-Jewish households identified in the screening process. These two samples were then combined and subjected to statistical procedures through which we estimate there to be a total of 667,000 Jewishly connected households in the eight-county Greater New York area.

In addition to overall household information, the interview included questions

about all individuals living in the household, so that with statistical techniques, the household sample projects to 1.6 million individuals, some of whom are not Jewish, reflecting the mixed composition of Jewishly connected households.

STUDY FINDINGS

The Populations

The NYJPS, like the NJPS, identifies a variety of connections to Jewishness, as shown in Table 1.

- Jews by religion
- Secular Jews
- Jews-by-Choice (converts)
- People who were once Jewish but no longer see themselves as Jewish (and may belong to another religion)
- People of Jewish parentage or Jewish upbringing with some other current religious identification
- Gentiles living in households with any of these types of Jews

Both studies show that there is no one Jewish population in America: rather, there are several types of connection to the Jewish world and to Jewishness.

From this typology we can single out two groups:

1. the core Jewish population—people who identify as Jews either by religion or in secular-ethnic terms
2. the periphery—people who have Jewish ancestry or parentage but do not currently identify themselves as Jews, in addition to Gentile adults living in Jewishly connected households

In 1991 we estimate that the Greater New York area has a core Jewish population of a 1.4 million Jews and a periphery of approximately 200,000 people, for a total of 1.6 million "Jewishly connected New Yorkers." The vast majority (83%) of Jewishly connected New Yorkers describe themselves as Jewish by religion.

Table 1
COMPARISON OF GREATER NEW YORK JEWISH POPULATION (1991)^a
AND U.S. JEWISH POPULATION (1990)^b

Type of Connection to Jewishness	New York Area		U.S. National	
	Number	Percent of Total Population in Jewishly Connected Households	Overall	Excluding New York
			Percent of Total Population in Jewishly Connected Households	
1. Born Jews: Religion Judaism	1,325,000	81	51	48
2. Jews by Choice—Converts (Jews by Religion)	21,000 (1,347,000)	1 (83)	2 (53)	3 (50)
3. Born Jews with No Religion (secular) CORE JEWISH POPULATION	72,000 (1,419,000)	4 (87)	14 (67)	15 (65)
4. Born/Raised Jewish: Currently not Jewish	17,000	1	3	3
5. Adults of Jewish Parentage with Other Current Religion	19,000	1	5	6
6. Children under 18 Being Raised with Other Current Religion	44,000	3	9	9
TOTAL ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE	(1,498,000)	(92)	(84)	(83)
7. Gentile Adults Living in Jewishly Connected Households	134,000	8	16	17
TOTAL POPULATION IN 668,098 JEWISHLY CONNECTED HOUSEHOLDS	(1,633,000)	100	100	100

NOTE: Numbers in some columns do not add up due to rounding off.

^a8 Counties: New York City, Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester

^bCJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey

Table 2
JEWISHLY CONNECTED HOUSEHOLD TYPES

County/Boro (No. of Households)	Household Contains		
	All Core Jews	Core Jews and Others	No Core Jews
Bronx (42,700)	82.4	11.2	6.4
Brooklyn (148,200)	84.6	10.9	4.6
Manhattan (188,200)	83.1	13.7	3.2
Queens (116,300)	82.9	13.7	3.4
Staten Island (12,400)	69.7	22.1	8.2
NYC Subtotal (507,800)	83.1	12.8	4.1
Nassau (77,400)	84.6	12.8	2.5
Suffolk (42,100)	60.3	27.9	11.8
Westchester (40,700)	74.7	21.2	4.1
Suburban Subtotal (160,200)	75.7	18.9	5.4
8-County Total (668,000)	81.3	14.3	4.4
1990 U.S. Jewish Population ^a (3,186,000)	56.8	27.2	15.9
1990 U.S. Jewish Population, excluding New York	53.6	28.5	17.8

^aCJF National Jewish Population Survey.

This is not the case nationwide. In comparison to the 83% of New York Jews who express their Jewishness as Jewish by religion, only 53% of the national Jewishly connected population identify this way (Table 1). Three times as many Jews outside New York answer "none" or "agnostic" or "atheist" regarding their religious affiliation, but still consider themselves to be Jewish.

New York differs from the rest of the nation even in terms of the size of the overall core versus the periphery, as seen in Table 1: In New York the core Jewish population is 87% of the total, whereas outside New York the core Jewish population is only 65%.

Jewish Household Types

When examining how core Jews interact with others in New York and nationwide, the difference is again dramatic. Table 2 presents the findings regarding Jewish household types in the New York City area compared to the nation. Both the NJPS and NYJPS identify three Jewish household types: those made up of core Jews only ("all core"); "mixed households," which contain core Jews and others (mainly Gentiles); and those households that contain "no core Jews" (comprised of people who have a peripheral connection to Jewishness).

The findings give us a sense of the relative mix or social distance between Jews and non-Jews in New York and the nation. The contrast between New York and the nation is again striking: 81% of New York Jewishly connected households contain all core Jews, 14% of the households contain core Jews and others, and only 4% contain no core Jews at all (but at least one person of Jewish parentage or upbringing). Nationally, only 57% of the households contain all core Jews, 27% are mixed households, and 16% contain no core Jews at all.

However, there are variations within the eight New York counties. Suffolk county, with 60% of its Jewishly connected households containing all core Jews and nearly

30% as mixed, looks more like the rest of the nation than do the other New York area counties. The percentage distributions for Staten Island and Westchester fall between the "modal" New York pattern and the national pattern.

Although household composition is not a measure of intermarriage per se, the findings suggest that when we examine intermarriage directly we will see clear differences between the New York and national rates.

Intermarriage

The NJPS 1990 findings regarding intermarriage have been highly charged, whether taken at face value as an accurate measure of American Jewish intermarriage or as evidence by some American Jewish sociologists that the NJPS findings were flawed (overly negative) due to biases in the computations and categorizations upon which they were built. This section offers a re-analysis of the NJPS findings, along with a first presentation of the NYJPS results.

A few methodological points are in order. First, the interview schedules used in the 1990 NJPS and in the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study were very similar, but were not identical. Regarding intermarriage, the New York study asked only about the year of *first* marriage, whereas the national study had information about the year of *each* marriage. Consequently, the analysis herein looks at *first marriages only* for both New York and the nation (excluding New York).

Second, given the criticism leveled at the NJPS regarding the categorization of people into the various Jewish identity types (Cohen & Berger, 1991), we have limited the analysis of intermarriage to a group of cases that present no categorization problems regarding Jewish identity. In technical terms, these are the "perfect cases"; in other words, the people who answer "Jewish" to each of the following questions: "In what religion were you born?," "In what religion were you raised?,"

Table 3
RELIGION OF FIRST SPOUSE FOR REFERENCE PERSON*

Religion of First Spouse	New York Area	National: Overall	Excluding New York
	(795,000)	(2,490,000)	
Born Jewish	85.3%	71.5%	69.2%
Convert to Judaism	1.4	4.4	4.9
Gentile	13.3	24.1	25.6
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*Based on "perfect cases," in which people consider their religion of birth, their religion of upbringing, and current religion to be Jewish.

Table 4
RELIGION OF FIRST SPOUSE FOR REFERENCE PERSON* BY YEAR OF FIRST MARRIAGE

Religion of Spouse	Year of First Marriage			
	Pre-1965	1965-1974	1975-1984	Since 1985
	(406,000)	(156,000)	(138,000)	(95,000)
	New York Area			
Born Jewish	94.5%	84.6%	73.9%	73.6%
Convert to Judaism	1.0	2.0	2.0	1.2
Gentile	4.5	13.4	24.1	25.1
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	National			
Gentile Spouse				
Overall	4.4	19.7	39.5	46.6
Excluding New York	5.0	21.0	40.7	46.9

*Based on "perfect cases," in which people consider their religion of birth, religion of upbringing, and current religion to be Jewish.

and "What is your current religion?" (By contrast, an "imperfect case" would be one where a person said, "I was born Jewish, I was raised with no religion, and I am now Jewish," or "I had no religion at birth, I was raised Jewish, I am currently Jewish." In these two examples the people would qualify as core Jews, but they would be excluded from the present analysis of perfect cases.) The perfect cases group is a subset of the core Jewish population. We define it for technical purposes only (and we do not investigate whether the people with "perfect scores" differ *sociologically* from those with "imperfect scores"), since it facilitates the cleanest comparison between the NJPS and the NYJPS.

Finally, the intermarriage patterns analyzed here are based on the responses of a *reference person* within each household

(respondent), and these percentages are then applied to the total number of perfect cases estimated in the population.

Table 3 shows the religion of the (first) spouse for Jews in New York and nationally. In New York 13.3% of the spouses of first marriages were Gentile, whereas the percentage is nearly double that (25.6%) elsewhere in the nation.

Table 4 compares first marriages over time. In New York, the percentage of first spouses who were Gentile increased five-fold in about 30 years—from 4.5% in marriages that occurred before 1965 to 25.1% in post-1985 marriages. Nationally, excluding New York, the incidence rose from 5% to 46.9% in the same time period. Again, the New York rate is about half the national rate.

Some may assume that a large Orthodox

Table 5
DENOMINATIONAL UPBRINGING OF JEWISH ADULTS

Denominational Upbringing	New York Area (1,130,000)	National	
		Overall (3,200,000)	Excluding New York
Orthodox	27.8%	24.9%	23.1%
Conservative	36.9	36.6	36.9
Reform	23.0	27.7	29.9
Reconstructionist	.5	.4	.4
Something Else	9.1	9.6	8.9
DKRF	3.7	.9	.8
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 6
RELIGION OF (FIRST) SPOUSE BY REFERENCE PERSON'S DENOMINATIONAL UPBRINGING:
NEW YORK COMPARED TO THE NATION

Religion of Spouse	Denominational Upbringing							
	Orthodox		Conservative		Reform		Something Else	
	NY	Non*	NY	Non*	NY	Non*	NY	Non*
Born Jewish	93.9	84.7	84.9	70.7	73.6	52.1	82.4	69.6
Convert to Judaism	1.3	5.5	1.5	4.5	1.3	5.4	2.1	3.8
Gentile	4.8	9.8	13.5	24.5	25.0	42.5	15.5	26.6
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*National figures excluding New York.

population in New York accounts for much of the difference between New York and the national intermarriage rates. However, an analysis of the denominational upbringing of Jewish adults (Table 5) reveals only a small difference in the percentage of Orthodox between New York and the rest of the American Jewish population: 27.8% have Orthodox upbringings in New York compared to 23.1% with Orthodox backgrounds outside New York.¹

Table 6 shows New York and national differences in religion of the first spouse for Jews with different denominational upbringings. Here we see what might be termed "the New York effect": Regardless of denominational background, people

who live in New York have lower rates of marrying Gentile spouses than their counterparts outside New York.

Table 7 shows the national and New York non-Orthodox intermarriage rates over time. Two familiar patterns are evident. The more recent the marriage, the more likely the spouse will be Gentile, and the "New York effect" remains apparent. Although New York non-Orthodox Jews show the same propensity to increasing intermarriage over time as their national counterparts, the rates are substantially lower in New York than nationally.

There are two ways to view the differences between the New York and national intermarriage rates. One possible interpretation is that New York seems to be at least 15 years behind the national rate, and consequently the New York rate will increase in years to come. Yet, the data also suggest that the New York rate of intermarriage seems to have leveled off somewhat between 1975-1984 and since

¹We looked also at the intermarriage rates for Orthodox Jews by *current* denomination: the rates were virtually nil—in New York 1.5% of the first spouses were Gentile and nationally 2.3% were Gentile. Orthodox Jews who marry Gentiles do not stay Orthodox.

Table 7

JEWS WITH NON-ORTHODOX UPBRINGING: RELIGION OF SPOUSE BY YEAR OF FIRST MARRIAGE

Religion of (First) Spouse	Year of First Marriage			
	Pre-1965	1965-1974	1975-1984	1985 +
New York Area				
Born Jewish	93.4%	82.0%	69.2%	68.7%
Convert to Judaism	.9	2.6	1.7	1.2
Gentile	5.6	15.4	29.1	30.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
National Excluding New York				
Born Jewish	92.5%	72.0%	49.5%	44.1%
Convert to Judaism	2.9	3.4	6.0	5.8
Gentile	4.7	24.6	43.8	50.2
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 8

JEWS WITH ORTHODOX UPBRINGING: RELIGION OF SPOUSE BY YEAR OF FIRST MARRIAGE

Religion of First Spouse	Year of First Marriage			
	Pre-1965	1965-1974	1975-1984	1985 +
New York Area				
Born Jewish	96.0%	90.7%	91.4%	91.0%
Convert to Judaism	1.1	.6	3.2	1.5
Gentile	2.9	8.7	5.4	7.5
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
National Excluding New York				
Born Jewish	90.9%	72.8%	80.5%	71.5%
Convert to Judaism	3.7	11.7	5.8	5.1
Gentile	5.3	15.6	13.7	23.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

1985, whereas the national rate has continued to climb.

Perhaps the most striking indication of the New York effect is in Table 8, which examines Jews with Orthodox upbringing. In the New York area there is a relatively stable and comparatively low rate of intermarriage over time. Nationally, however, there is a much higher rate of intermarriage, even among those who were raised Orthodox. An Orthodox upbringing appears to offer no guarantee against intermarriage.

DISCUSSION

What accounts for New York's very different profile? Does New York have more and/or better rabbis? Is New York's Jewish

community a more fervent population? Or is there some aspect of the New York context that makes it easier for Jewishly connected New Yorkers—even the less observant—to continue to identify outright as Jews?

We argue that New York provides a different context for religion and ethnicity—for Jewishness—compared to elsewhere in the United States. It may be explained in terms of the concept of "propinquity" (Blau, 1977). In other words, the sheer numbers of Jews who live in the New York City area make it more likely for Jews to interact with other Jews just by chance. One can add to this rather structural dimension the long and rich presence of Jews in the history of New York City—in its public

life and institutions, its commerce, and art. Together, these structural and historical characteristics have important sociopsychological consequences that are seen in the ease with which New Yorkers identify themselves as Jewish. The New York-national comparisons suggest that it is easier to remain a Jew in New York than outside it. (Even the *goyim* in New York are Jewish, remarked the comedian Lenny Bruce, whereas Jews living in far-flung places are *goyish!*)

The New York findings reveal a very high Jewish identification rate among New York Jews, suggesting that New York City itself is a place that strengthens Jewish awareness, even through such trivial matters as signs for Alternate Side of the Street Parking, through which the most obscure of the Jewish holidays become known, in name at least, to non-Jews and Jews alike. The sheer number of Jews living in close proximity makes for a Jewish presence in the city. The city heightens awareness about Jewishness as a social category, as groups in the city become aware of one another and the boundaries between them (Tajfel, 1981). Table 1 shows evidence of this heightened awareness. Consider the differences between New York and the rest of the nation in terms of flows into and out of Judaism—the percentages of converts to and from Judaism. The national rates are three times as high, suggesting that whereas nationally the boundary between Jew and non-Jew may be permeable, in New York it is only semi-permeable. Thus, Lenny Bruce wasn't exactly right in calling the *goyim* in New York Jewish; rather, they are aware of their "non-Jewishness." "Jewish" in New York has become a significant social category.

Therefore, a major point that arises out of the preliminary findings of the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study is that the stereotypic image of the anonymous, unaffiliated, and unconnected Jew living in the city is not accurate. The New York findings show that identification is high—

at least in terms of quantity, if not quality of identification. We in New York ought to treat this as a resource.

The NJPS findings do not paint a happy picture of the American Jewish future: American life to entirely too many Jews today means nothing is preventing them from leaving Judaism behind. There is a pattern of slow but sure erosion of the Jewish community in America—the longer we are here, the fewer of us will remain.

In the face of this "erosion model," the classical Zionist policy strategy is a call for increased *aliyah*. In contrast, the current American Jewish communal approach seems to be a medical strategy of inoculating the young people with Yiddishkeit to prevent them from succumbing.

The New York demographic findings suggest another key element worth the attention of policymakers. The erosion model does not fully explain the high rates of Jewish identification in New York—after all, New York is one of America's oldest Jewish communities, yet Jews and Jewishness persist here in abundance. Thus we question the efficacy of the inoculation approach by itself. We are correct in worrying about the specter of diminishing numbers, but in addition to trying to reach individuals, we must devise a policy at the collective level that would show the appeal and draw of Jewish life. This is especially possible in New York, for as we have shown in this article, New York is a place where Jewishness has become a social category of consequence, over and above the private lives of the individual Jews who live here. How exactly to accomplish this goal is beyond the scope of this article and remains a major item on our strategic planning agenda for the coming decades.

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