# Issues in the Study of the Urban and Regional Distribution of Jews in the United States

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Jews in the United States have always been an urban people. Since the great immigration waves of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jews have geographically concentrated in large metropolitan areas. Bringing a developing urban heritage with them from Europe, Jews found their place in the industrializing centers of urban life. The cities matured and changed in the 20th century from densely crowded urban cores to city and suburbs, and then to sprawling metropolises with multi-functional economic bases and geographic complexity.

Jewish population distribution changed as well, as urban and regional patterns shifted. Jews moved into new neighborhoods as old ones changed, abandoning cities in the Northeast and Midwest for newer cities in the South, Southwest and West, and participating in the nascent redevelopment and gentrification processes in once abandoned neighborhoods.

American Jews have also been an extremely mobile people. Regional and urban contexts have a strong influence on the nature of American Jewry. Social and cultural behavior patterns and infrastructures are distinctly different from one part of the United States to another. Religious behaviors can be influenced by regional and urban location. Therefore, the migration patterns of Jews in the United States have a strong impact on the evolving character of American Jewry.

Urban and regional structure in America has undergone profound changes in the last twenty years alone. Within two decades, the country has witnessed the explosive growth of the sunbelt cities, the revitalization of central city neighborhoods and downtown business districts, and the rapid growth of outer-ring suburbs, including small cities and towns. The increasing specialization of urban functions has resulted from the emergence of technology, service, and government-dependent economies.

Jews are sometimes analyzed as a religious group, and sometimes as an ethnic group, but rarely as an urban and regional group. They are often compared to Protestants and Catholics, or to Italians and Blacks, but not to the populations of the cities or regions in which they reside. Inter-urban and regional comparisons between Jewish populations are even more rare. Comparisons of Jews by city and region are important; demographically, institutionally, and religiously.

Metropolitan areas and regions can be used as the contextual bases in which some issues in Jewish life are explored. The effects of urban size, regional location, and urban type should be examined in detail. Urban and regional differences may subdivide the Jewish populations into distinguishable subgroups. While certain

demographic and religious characteristics of Jews may supercede urban and regional differences, others can be influenced by the contextual base in which Jews reside.

Rates of urban and regional growth and decline, economic bases, topography, transportation systems, urban form, climate and life style can affect different Jewish communities in different ways. The urban context can directly influence the types and locations of organizational and institutional structure and the ways that these are integrated or removed from everyday Jewish life. Urban and regional structure can be key determinants of Jewish organizational and institutional structure. The external urban and regional environment plays an important role, just as do the internal dynamics of the group itself.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first analyzes some methodological issues involved in studying the regional and urban shifts of American Jewry. Second, some basic themes concerning regional and intercity mobility are discussed. This analysis is done within the limitations of available data. Third, the policy implications of regional and urban shifts are discussed. None of these can be presented in great detail, but rather the major issues in each are presented. Urban and regional differences themselves are not discussed in this paper.

## Methodological Issues

The full extent of regional and urban shifts in the United States remains unknown. Severe limitations in available data sources prevent a comprehensive analysis of the geographic distribution of American Jews. Since religion is omitted from the United States Census, a comprehensive national picture is not available. The last National Jewish Population Study was conducted almost twenty years ago; therefore what is known about regional and urban shifts must be gleaned from available population studies done in individual Jewish communities.

It may be impossible to accurately gauge the true picture of the regional and urban distribution of American Jews, given the methodological and cost constraints of sampling Jews in the United States. A 1990 study will be conducted at the national level. Even when the study is completed, however, the picture presented may not be entirely accurate.

The three methods used to sample Jewish populations all have limitations in providing a true picture of the regional and urban distribution of Jews. The first method, utilizing lists, has the most obvious deficiencies. Lists are comprised of the most affiliated Jews. Identity, affiliation, and the propensity to live in more densely settled Jewish areas are all variables associated with one another. Within large metropolitan areas, Jews least likely to be on organizational lists are those most likely to be in the geographic periphery of low density suburbs and exurbs. Furthermore, lists are not available in every community. Many communities fall between organizational and institutional boundaries, where lists are not kept. Jews living in areas unknown to any Jewish organization or agency will be found where there is low geographic density, whether in exurbs, small towns, or rural areas.

Distinctive Jewish surnames can be used as a rough indicator of the total size of the Jewish population in any particular area. Theoretically, one could analyze every

conceivable phone or street directory and compute distinctive Jewish name percentages to arrive at a total Jewish population in the United States, as well as its regional and urban distribution. Such a task is monumental, of course, and some verification techniques would have to be incorporated, especially in rural areas with high proportions of German names, for example, that appear on the distinctive Jewish surname list. Furthermore, in very low density areas, without verifying the true representation of the distinctive Jewish name of Jews, very small incidences could radically alter the total estimate of the Jewish population. Therefore, verification would be prone to high rates of error, and would be extremely costly.

The use of random digit dialing is a third method by which Jewish populations can be located and estimated. Random digit dialing is the method utilized in the National Jewish Population Study to estimate the geographic distribution of Jews. Pure random digit dialing would screen all households with telephones to ascertain the proportion of Jews. Pure random digit dialing would also require screening telephones in sufficient numbers all over the United States to produce a population estimate. However, screening the entire United States of over 240,000,000 individuals to discover a sample representing the distribution of America's approximately 6,000,000 Jews would require expenditures beyond the scope of any available willing sponsor. Therefore, a stratified sample is utilized that makes some presumptions about the location of the Jewish population, particularly by urban area. The greatest focus is on the urban areas where Jews are known to live. While the sample may have a nominal number of screening calls in other areas, some areas are likely to be undersampled.

Small cities and towns in rural areas are certain to be undersampled. The likely density of Jews in these areas is so small that efficient random digit dialing is impossible. Therefore, one of the more interesting regional and urban phemomena that may be occurring, the shift of Jews from or to small towns, cities, and rural areas, will be relatively unexplored. Some of the movement to larger urban areas will be discovered in the former place of residence data or place of birth data within the urban samples. The movement in the other direction will be lost. The net gain or loss of Jews outside large urban areas will be unknown. Intended destination data will not be available in enough detail.

It is likely that Jews in the lowest density suburbs and in exurban areas of large metropolitan areas will also be undersampled. It is difficult, through the screening mechanism, to pick up Jewish populations where they constitute only 5%, 2%, or even smaller proportions of the total number of households. This, of course, is usually the case in low density, outlying areas. Some studies have shown that Jews who live in outlying areas within the metropolis tend to be younger, less affiliated, and more likely to be married to non-Jews. Therefore, the inability to capture the true extent of this phenomenon may provide a less than accurate profile of the state of American Jewry in the 1990s.

Jews who move to inner city redevelopment areas are also likely to be undercounted. These areas are usually located in predominantly black neighborhoods, with white enclaves developing within those areas, or Jews scattered as pioneers in redevelopment housing. Local studies have shown that these Jews also

tend to be younger, less affiliated, and have higher rates of intermarriage (when these households can be located).

Through the failure to fully capture the outer suburb and ex-suburb movements, movements to small towns, cities, and rural areas, as well as movements to redevelopment areas, the true distribution of the Jewish population may be unknown. These fundamental regional and urban shifts are critical to our understanding of contemporary American Jewry, and yet may remain something of a mystery even after a national study is completed.

## Analysis of Existing Data

The analysis of this discussion is based on individual community surveys conducted in the mid- and late-1980s. All of these studies used some form of random digit dialing as the basis for population estimates and sample selection. Data are available from a large number of communities throughout the United States, including Baltimore, Boston, Dallas, Houston, Morris/Essex County (New Jersey), Palm Beach (Florida), San Francisco, and a number of others. These studies represent Jewish communities in all regions of the United States (see bibliography). Data are also available for a few smaller Jewish communities such as Worcester (Massachusetts) and Atlantic City (New Jersey). Two obvious shortcomings of the existing data must be pointed out. First, there is very little reliable information on Jewish communities of 10,000 to 20,000, and practically no information on communities of 10,000 or less. Jews in scores of cities across the United States in concentrations of 10,000 or less may constitute as much as 10%, or perhaps even more, of the total United States Jewish population. Therefore, this missing data set constitutes a large gap in our current understanding of the regional and urban distribution and migration patterns of American Jewry. Furthermore, recent data are not available from New York and Los Angeles, the two largest Jewish communities in the United States. The last surveys of these two communities were completed almost ten years ago.

Jewish population estimates come primarily from the American Jewish Yearbook. Population estimates by city and state are published annually. The data, however, are estimated at the local level. Some of the statistics come from reliable research done in the individual community. Some are fairly good estimates based on affiliation rates, contributions to Jewish philanthropies, or other measures that facilitate estimates. Others are merely the best guesses of someone in the Jewish community. And still others are the repeated publication, sometimes for many years, of someone's good or bad estimate from years past.

The growth or decline of Jewish populations in metropolitan areas and small cities and towns usually reflects patterns of the general population. The growth and decline of an area are often paralleled by similar rates and direction of growth of the Jewish communities. However, the Jewish population is different enough that the general population trends cannot be used as a proxy.

Data for the remaining community studies allow us to draw some inferences about migration patterns from New York, but little light can be shed on changes

within the Los Angeles area. Each of the community studies asks questions about: place of birth; origin of the most recent move; likelihood of a move out of the metropolitan area of current residence; and likely destination for those who intend to move. Utilizing these variables, some general themes can be documented.

Evidence from studies done throughout the United States shows that a substantial proportion of households in each community consists of individuals who were either born in New York or who had recently moved from New York. These data may indicate the continued out-migration of population from New York City, but without comparable in-migration data, the net change obviously cannot be accurately assessed. However, given the rates of growth in communities throughout the South, Southwest, and West, the stable birthrate in the United States, and, therefore the lack of net increase of the Jewish population in the United States (except for increased immigration), it would seem logical that New York continues to lose Jewish population. Conversely, destination data from available studies do not show a high proportion of individuals indicating that they plan to move to New York. It should be expected, therefore, that New York will continue to lose its dominance in terms of population in American Jewry. At this point it is possible that the total proportion of the United States Jewish population residing in New York has dipped below 25% and will continue to decline. While still the capital of American Jewry, regional challengers have emerged.

Two dominant areas of growth of American Jewry are southern Florida and California, particularly southern California. Local studies indicate that the total Jewish population in Florida probably exceeds 600,000, while the total Jewish population of California probably tops 1,000,000. Over the next twenty years it is not unlikely that one of every three American Jews will live in either California or Florida. Movement into other sunbelt communities, such as Atlanta, Phoenix, Tucson, and Jewish communities in Virginia continues as well. It is not unlikely that Jewish communities in Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and others will continue to show a slight net loss in their population over the next two decades.

Changing motivations of the relocation to sunbelt cities can be seen in the reasons for the move of Jewish households to Miami. For those who have lived there five years or less, work-related factors and proximity to a large Jewish community are listed as reasons for moving to Dade County, compared to 24% of those who have been there more than twenty years. To be near friends is listed by 11% of those who have lived there five years or less, compared to 1% of those who have lived there twenty years or more. Climate and health-related reasons remain important to a majority of the in-movers, regardless of the length of residency. But the growing attraction of the Jewish community itself, and the attraction of the growing southern Florida economy are just as important as health and climate attractions.

While climate, health, and retirement are major reasons given for moving to the sunbelt communities, job-related reasons dominate for moves to cities like Pittsburgh. Almost three-fifths of the in-migrants listed job-related motives for their move to Pittsburgh. Another 30% listed marriage and family reasons, and 12% listed schools as a reason for their move to Pittsburgh. On the other hand, 41% of the potential out-migrants from Pittsburgh listed retirement or climate as a factor in the decision to leave the Pittsburgh area.

Rates of growth, however, are not limited by regional factors. Certain communities in the Northeast and Midwest also continue to gain Jewish populations as a result of growing specialized economies. For example, the Boston metropolitan area continues to attract Jews, especially those under the age of 35. This dual-based education/technology economy offers large employment bases for Jews. Washington, D.C. continues to attract Jews primarily as a result of the government-based economy. Thus, while the movement of Jews continues to be a regional phenomenon from the Midwest and Northeast to the South, Southwest and West, by no means is the movement entirely regional without effect from the special character of particular urban structures or economies.

When asked about intended destination, individuals over the age of 55 in Midwestern and Northeastern communities continue to cite Arizona and California, but particularly Florida, as their primary choice for relocation. It would appear from data regarding intended destination that the sunbelt will continue to attract increasing proportions of the Jewish population.

An interesting aspect of inter-city movement of Jews is the critical mass of the Jewish population that seems to be necessary for substantial growth. Certain sunbelt communities such as Tucson have reached a critical mass of Jews, due perhaps to the recreational/environmental/snowbird character of the community. A large number of Jews continue to move to Tucson. On the other hand, certain boom economies such as Charlotte, North Carolina, where the metropolitan area has grown to well over 1,000,000 residents still finds only a few thousand Jews living in the community, and it is not likely to attract a large Jewish population in the future. Exactly what role a concentration of Jewish population or the availability of Jewish institutional infrastructure has in the particular growth patterns of a community is unknown. Yet it would appear that at some point a critical mass snowballs sufficiently to attract a larger number of Jews.

Data from Dallas indicate a substantial migration from small cities and towns throughout Texas. Whether or not the in-movement reflects an emptying out of Jewish populations from rural and small-town Texas into Dallas (and Houston) is unknown, given the lack of available data in the origin communities. Popular wisdom would hold that merchant families and others who were in specialized occupations throughout small cities and towns appear to be abandoning those enclaves for the larger Jewish populations of major cities. It would appear, at least from the Dallas data, that migration of Jews from small cities and towns is occurring. On the other hand, Jewish population growth in small towns in California and New England may be increasing as large urban populations spill over into more rural counties.

Overall, the community studies indicate a substantial inter-city and inter-regional migration. In most communities, especially in the sunbelt, a large majority of the population was not born in the city in which they currently reside. In some sunbelt communities, a proportion as high as 90% of the population was born elsewhere. Furthermore, as many as 10% of the population moves to some of these sunbelt communities and other specialized economies in the Northeast every year.

For example, in the Washington, DC area one Jew in seven was born there. 30% of the respondents not born in the Washington area have lived there less than five

years. Comparing the population by age category supports the findings from other studies that younger people move more often. Almost half of the Jewish population 18 to 34 has lived in the area less than five years (46%), while most 35 to 44-year-olds have lived in the area 11 to 20 years (37%), and more than half of Jewish persons over 45 have lived in the area more than 20 years (54%).

Denver, typical of the growing cities of the West and South, shows that only 22% of those in Jewish households were born in that city. An equal proportion were born in New York, and another 32% came from the East and Midwest–e.g. more than half were from those regions. Only 3% of Denver's Jewish households came from the South, and 11% from the West. While 31% of those households over 50 were born in Denver, 18% of those under 30 were born there.

In San Francisco, about 3% of the household respondents were born in the South and Southwest, and only 3% from elsewhere in the West. Almost 16% came from the Midwest, 10% from the mid-Atlantic states, and 5% from the Northeast, other than New-York. Over 25% were born in New York, and 27% were born in California. Of these, about two-thirds were born in the Bay area, and the remainder in places throughout California.

In Essex/Morris counties (New Jersey), 3% were born in the Northeast. Nearly half, 48%, were born in the mid-Atlantic region, primarily New Jersey, and 37% were born in New York, higher than in the Bay area but not dramatically, given the proximity of these New Jersey counties to New York.

Given the high occupational/educational/income profile of American Jews, it is not surprising that they are extremely mobile in terms of both city and region, and that they make multiple moves in their adult lives. Some of the movement, of course, involves individuals who leave their home community for a particular educational or occupational opportunity, but who return to their place of birth or the area in which they were raised at some later date. The data do indicate that like other Americans, Jews under the age of 25 are the most likely to make an inter-city move, primarily to attend school, or to obtain a first employment opportunity.

Much of the regional phenomenon is linked to age and other special populations. The movement to southern Florida and Arizona is largely among Jews over the age of 55. Age is also a factor in the growth of the Jewish population of Boston, which attracts disproportionate numbers of students. San Francisco has high proportions of individuals under the age of 35, as well as a high proportion who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Morris/Essex County in New Jersey, as part of the suburban economy of the greater New York area, has attracted disproportionate numbers of young families with children under the age of 18. Thus, the data indicate that specialized economies combined with certain environmental and recreational amenities attract specialized populations to particular areas. While this attraction is often age related, it is sometimes related to occupation, sexual preference, or other variables that influence concentrations of Jews and their choices of both city and region.

Mobility of college-age youths is also a phenomenon affecting the geographic location of Jews. The vast majority of Jewish youths obtain a college education and most of them attend college away from their own metropolitan area. In Pittsburgh, about two-thirds of the college population attends school outside of the Pittsburgh

area. It is not clear what influence attending school away from home has on the residential choice of college youth. It may be assumed that some of them choose to remain in the city where they receive their education, either on a temporary or permanent basis.

One of the difficult factors to assess in the overall distribution of American Jewry is the destination of Israeli and Soviet emigres. Due to a combination of language barriers and reluctance to participate in such surveys, Israeli and Soviet Jews tend to be undercounted in community studies. It is not unlikely that they will be undercounted in the National Jewish Population Study as well, although the primary growth of the Jewish population over the past twenty years has come from the immigration of these two groups, and their destination can have a substantial impact on the overall distribution of American Jews. It is believed that the highest concentrations of both Soviets and Israelis can be found in New York and Los Angeles. Therefore, the immigration of these groups may mitigate to some extent the net loss of the New York area. On the other hand, it may also add to the continued growth of southern California. In all, however, the total impact of the movement of these two groups is relatively unknown.

## Implications

Continuing shifts in regional and urban distribution of American Jews have a number of implications. First, extended families, and even nuclear families, continue to be scattered across the country. The continuity of Jewish family is an essential element in the strength of Jewish life. Continued regionalization of Jews along occupational, age, and life style variables may have continued serious consequences for the family, and therefore, the vitality of American Jewry.

Second, segmentation by age is of particular concern. Some southern Florida communities have populations ranging anywhere between 35% and 80% who are over the age of 65. This isolation and concentration may have unknown consequences in terms of service delivery, particularly services for the aged, and the ability of these communities to support such services over the next twenty years.

Third, institutional and organizational infrastructures in sunbelt communities are often less well developed than they are in Northern and Midwestern communities, Therefore, the ability to bind Jewish populations together through organizational and institutional links is somewhat diminished.

Fourth, Jewish growth in Arizona and California tends to be in geographically dispersed areas. Therefore, the positive effects of geographic density are lost on larger and larger proportions of Jews in the sunbelt who do not live in what may be termed as "Jewish neighborhoods."

Fifth, fundraising is increasingly difficult in newer communities. Jews tend not to reconnect with organizational and institutional structures, both in Florida and California. Therefore, the ability to raise funds, for both local purposes and for Israel and other overseas communities, is diminished.

Sixth, affiliation rates in sunbelt communities are considerably lower than in Northern and Midwestern communities. This, too, is a function of age and the

predisposition not to affiliate after a recent move, but also the competition of life style for Jewish time and resources. The Jews of Florida behave like Floridians, and the Jews of California act like Californians. Religion is generally less observed in the West, and other life style considerations are usually more important in Florida. Therefore, as more Jews move to California and Florida, larger proportions may be detached from organized Jewish life.

In all, the continued regional and urban distribution of Jews may tend to weaken Jewish life in the United States. Obviously, this is not to say that the Jewish communities of the Northeast and Midwest are "good" for the Jews, while sunbelt communities are "bad" for the Jews. It does suggest, however, that special efforts must be made in terms of strengthening Jewish organizations and institutions there. Such efforts may include shifting resources, if necessary, from the Northeast and Midwest to southern Florida particularly, but other sunbelt communities as well, in order to help construct the Jewish organizational and institutional networks which help bind Jews together. If the expected growth of the sunbelt continues, with the migration of Jews to the sunbelt, Judaism in the United States will be weakened unless special efforts are made to strengthen these Jewish communities and help them absorb the rapid influx of Jews from the rest of the United States.

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