Let Our Population Data Go
Opinion
Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin and Benjamin Phillips

With the all the news preoccupying the Jewish community, it slipped under the radar that United Jewish Communities last year obtained trademark protection for the terms National Jewish Population Survey® and National Jewish Population Study®. Although the UJC has foresworn conducting a 2010 survey of American Jewry, by registering NJPS® as a service mark, they prevent anyone else from claiming that they are carrying out an “official” national Jewish population survey.

Corporations, nonprofits and NGOs register their names for multiple reasons. United Jewish Communities® has registered its name, as has Camp Ramah® and the Red Cross®, as well as corporations like McDonald’s® and Coca-Cola®. Camp Ramah might want to prevent confusion with others who might offer similar services, perhaps a Jewish community that wants to capitalize on the name recognition of Ramah to start its own summer camp program.

By trademarking NJPS®, does UJC intend to police the process of conducting a national Jewish population survey so that it remains the sole source of authentic quantitative information about American Jews, just as Coca-Cola® remains the sole source of the authentic Coca-Cola® recipe?

A little recent history may be helpful. The National Jewish Population Survey® conducted in 1990 for UJC’s predecessor, the Council of Jewish Federations, cost relatively little. To identify Jews, who constitute a rare population, an existing marketing survey was utilized. Although there are questions about the representativeness of the 1990 sample, the survey generated a host of useful research reports and books describing the state of American Jewry.

Unfortunately, debate about a single finding of the 1990 study, the 52% intermarriage rate, led some to believe that the purpose of research was to generate arguments among scholars. It will likely take historians to determine whether the concern provoked by the intermarriage finding promoted productive discussion and action.

The next National Jewish Population Survey®, conducted in 2000-01, was based on a different model, and UJC managed the survey in-house with the help of numerous consultants. In the end, the study was plagued by multiple conceptual and administrative errors.

Instead of relying on an existing sample of Americans, as the 1990 survey had done, they employed a contractor to construct their own sample. Perhaps in principle this was a good idea, but it proved impossible to execute well.

Creating the 2000-01 sample was costly — more than $6 million of communal funds were invested in the study. Because of implementation problems, only a small number of those who were contacted agreed to participate in the survey, and assessing the survey is difficult because key data were lost. Although it’s possible to use NJPS® 2000-01 data to inform certain types of policy decision making, the study failed to provide the definitive portrait of American Jewry that could guide future planning.
Given the problems with NJPS® 2000-01, perhaps it is better that the name is trademarked and not used to describe more accurate efforts to understand and assess the Jewish community. Future efforts will, undoubtedly, need to be organized differently. Such studies will need to be conducted under auspices other than UJC’s, using different methods and employing a different name.

That new national studies are different does not mean that they should be regarded as purveying an inauthentic recipe. To the contrary, it opens the possibility of developing better information to inform policy and resource allocation.

If this goal is to be realized, those of us in the academic and policy community who have the skills and capacity need to step up to develop a plan to conduct needed research. That UJC seems to have given up on national surveys of Jews should be a motivator, not a deterrent. In the 21st century, it is difficult to think of an effective organization that does not use systematic information for planning.

Studying our small Jewish population is undoubtedly difficult, but new methods are available that will enable us to better gather information and translate it for policy use. The Jewish community has not been well-served by poor research and deserves better. Several efforts to plan the necessary research are underway, both by our own group and by colleagues at other universities in the United States and Israel.

To its credit, UJC is trying to develop a program to support research on important community issues. It has, for example, recently issued a request for proposals for a study of Jewish geographic mobility. Unfortunately, paralleling its trademarking efforts, UJC requires ownership and control of all data and publications that result from this research.

The process smacks of a priori censorship and makes it impossible for university-based groups to participate. Potentially, it limits the ability of the community to understand what has been learned and feeds the perception that research is being manipulated to ensure particular results.

Perhaps the creation of the NJPS® service mark does not signal an interest in limiting and controlling debate, discussion and research about the Jewish community. We certainly hope so. Neither the community nor UJC’s interests are served by such control.

*Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin and Benjamin Phillips are, respectively, director, distinguished scholar and senior research associate at Brandeis University’s Steinhardt Social Research Institute.*

**Comments**

Carmel U. Chiswick, Professor of Economics, UIC said:

The authors' characterization of NJPS 2000-01 as failing to provide a "guide to future planning" is at best controversial. Although their objections are well known and widely available, many reputable scholars remain unconvinced that the problems they identify are so severe as to undermine the general usefulness of this survey. It would be extremely unfortunate if researchers were misled into ignoring this valuable source of data on the American Jewish community.

Fri. Aug 17, 2007

Copyright © 2007 Forward Association, inc.