Population Study:  
*Questioning The Validity*  

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From its conception to release of findings last week, the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 has been steeped in controversy. Controversy about research is not necessarily bad and often signals the importance of the questions being asked. Critical decisions need to be made by leaders of the American Jewish community and intense debate about the character of that community is to be expected.

The United Jewish Communities, in its report on NJPS, portrays a Jewish population that has declined “marginally, is aging, and is less fertile than others in the U.S.” The report also finds that a majority of Jews engage in some ritual and holiday celebrations. But are these findings valid? As researchers who have been examining NJPS for nearly a year, we are not convinced.

One problem in validating NJPS is that its findings cannot be compared directly with other studies, most importantly the 1990 population survey. NJPS created its own way of measuring identity and its own methods for locating and engaging respondents. But at this stage, the essential questions about NJPS are about the way data were analyzed. They failed to capture the views of many of those Jews whose Jewish identity is weakest. Key information was ignored.

The American Jewish community comprises less than 3 percent of the U.S. population. We do not know for sure, however, because unlike most countries, the U.S. census does not ask about religion. NJPS located Jews by calling a random sample of telephone numbers. Random digit dialing is costly — to locate one Jewish household, you need to interview almost 40 non-Jews.

NJPS began with 1.3 million residential phone numbers. From this list, the study eventually interviewed about 180,000 individuals. Some phone numbers were out of service or no one answered after repeated calls. But in many cases, a person answered and refused to be interviewed. After adjusting for numbers that probably were not residences, UJC calculates that it was able to reach 28 percent of those called.

By focusing on geographic areas thought most likely to have Jews, NJPS uncovered nearly 7,000 households containing a Jewish adult and nearly 1,200 containing a “person of Jewish background.” Unfortunately, in nearly 40 percent of the Jewish households, interviewers were unable to get past the initial questions about Jewish identity. This lowers the actual response rate to about 16 percent. We can only approximate these response rates, however, because UJC’s survey firm lost much of these data.

Using the available data, along with an estimate of the lost interviews, UJC concluded that there are 5.2 million American Jews — 4.3 million who consider themselves Jewish by religion or birth and another 900,000 “Persons of Jewish Background.”
These population figures are just estimates, and given the relatively low response rate, accepting them requires a leap of faith. We have to assume that Jews respond to telephone inquiries at the same rate as others. Although there may have been other factors alongside the sampling issues, our conclusion is that NJPS may have undercounted the Jewish population. Other studies have found more Jews and the findings of NJPS seem anomalous.

The NJPS report highlights the finding of an “aging” American Jewish population. Again, given the low response rate, it’s hard to know. Different age groups have differential response rates to a telephone interview. Unlike other surveys that use census data to make the respondents “look like” the population with respect to age and other factors, that can’t be done in this case.

UJC’s analysis becomes even more problematic when it moves beyond population counts to an assessment of their characteristics. The key problem is that the findings do not properly take account of individuals who failed to complete an interview. From what can be gleaned from the data that were preserved (900 of 2,500 cases), these “incomplete” households are very different from those that completed an interview. The “incomplete” households were, for example, much more likely to contain both Jews and non-Jews.

It should not be surprising that mixed religious households are more difficult to engage in a discussion of Jewish identity. All surveys have an easier time gaining cooperation from those most interested in the issues. In the case of NJPS, because many answered the screening questions but then weren’t interviewed, we at least know the extent of the problem. It’s both possible and essential to represent these households. Doing so has obvious implications for findings about intermarriage and extent of Jewish engagement.

The NJPS data are, despite our critique, a valuable resource. Nearly 4,500 Jews were interviewed at length. Each talked about their education, family, connections to other Jews, Israel, and the community. The data are potentially rich in what they reveal about how one’s background influences present beliefs and practices. The study should yield new ways to think about the meaning of being a Jewish American.

UJC’s present analyses of NJPS have likely underestimated the population and overestimated their engagement. Re-analyses, however, may correct some of this distortion. The findings also need to be triangulated by other studies using both similar and different methods. We may even be able to estimate the amount of error by comparing NJPS’ estimated rates of day school enrollment, synagogue membership and federation giving to the actual numbers.

As we seek perspective on NJPS, the considerable difficulty of the task needs to be acknowledged. Jews are a small minority and contemporary Jewish identity is extremely complex. Jews, as the report emphasizes, are a diverse lot. Some pray daily, some rarely visit a shul and many never find their way to communal institutions. Some were born Jewish, others have mixed parentage and some do not have any Jewish heritage. To its credit, the study tried to capture this complexity.

The time has come to turn the controversy over the findings into debate about substance. We need to learn what NJPS can teach us while being careful about what we conclude. UJC has decided to make the data available for everyone to scrutinize, and we have helped to make this possible (see www.jewishdatabank.org). Researchers and community planners will, we hope, take advantage of this resource and use it to learn more about the character of those who comprise the Jewish community.

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