research notes

Intermarriage and Conversion: The Case from the Boston Data

This Research Note is the second in a series of four to deal with one of the most critical challenges to the contemporary American Jewish community—intermarriage. The first Research Note in this series showed that intermarried households in a community may be counted in several different ways, producing widely varying intermarriage rates for couples and individuals.

This second Research Note will present overall intermarriage rates around the country and will examine the rising intermarriage rate in one Jewish community, Boston. The third Research Note will compare the dramatically differing Jewish characteristics of intermarried and unmarried households. The fourth Research Note will explore changing attitudes toward intermarriage in the Jewish community.

All four Notes present an empirical view of intermarriage. Knowing the basic facts about intermarriage in large Jewish communities is a prerequisite for intelligent policy planning decisions. Together, the four Notes on Understanding Trends in Intermarriage will help elucidate the actual behavior and attitudes of American Jews. Such clarification is crucial to policy makers, professionals, and lay leaders within the Jewish community.

Unlike other communities, Boston has been conducting Jewish population studies every ten years. Thus, the Boston data provide a useful picture not only of the behavior of Jews today, but also of the current behavior of Jews as it compares to previous behavior. Data from three major surveys which were administered in greater Boston in 1985, 1975, and 1965 under the auspices of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston are used in this series, as well as comparative data from other communities.

We begin with a comparison of the current intermarriage rates in Boston with those in other major Jewish communities. Current Boston intermarriage rates and the changes in these rates over the last three decades are then presented, followed by a discussion of conversion rates in Boston.¹

Intermarriage Rates in U.S. Cities

Intermarriage rates from Jewish community studies conducted in the 1980s, including Boston, are presented below in Figure 1.

¹The percentage rates presented are for intermarried households, and not for individual Jews. An intermarried household is defined as a marriage between a Jew and a born non-Jew (whether converted or not). See L. Sternberg, “Intermarriage: A First Look,” Research Notes, Volume 2, No. 1, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, May 1988.
We can speculate about several factors which may cause these differences. Location of the city plays a part: Western cities generally have the highest intermarriage rates. This elevated intermarriage rate may be connected to the fact that the Jewish populations in cities such as Denver, Phoenix, and San Francisco include a large proportion of persons who have migrated from other areas, and presumably do not have well-established family and Jewish friendship networks which might connect them more firmly to the Jewish community.

Site and density of the Jewish population also plays a part: cities with large, centralized Jewish populations generally have lower intermarriage rates than cities with small and scattered Jewish populations. Age and generation of the married Jewish population is a third important factor: younger (or third and fourth generation) Jews are far more likely to be intermarried than older (or first and second generation) Jews. Thus, Eastern cities with large Jewish populations and long-established Jewish communities usually have lower intermarriage rates than Western cities with younger and more mobile Jewish populations.

Changes in Intermarriage Rates

The 1985 data show that there are 100,000 Jewish households in greater Boston representing a total of 228,000 Jews. Out of all currently married couples, 18% are involved in an intermarriage. That is, 18% of the currently married households include a spouse who was born as a non-Jew. In comparison, in 1975, 13% of married couples were intermarried, and in 1965 only 7% of married couples were intermarried. The increase in the intermarriage rate in the last two decades is similar: 6% from 1965 to 1975 and 5% from 1976 to 1985.

In 1985, 61% of the households in greater Boston consisted of currently married couples. The rest were singles or previously married (separated, divorced or widows). Similar percentages hold for 1975 and 1965. Out of currently married couples in 1985, 90% had married only once. For all couples for whom their current marriage is their first marriage, 15% were intermarried in 1985. The intermarriage rate is far higher, however, among second marriages than it is among first marriages. Figure 2 shows that in first marriages performed between 1965 and 1985, 26% were intermarriages while more than twice that rate, 54%, of second marriages were intermarriages.

If we examine first marriages by the year that the couples were married, as shown in Table 1, we see great differences. The table shows that only 7% of marriages from 1955 to 1965 were intermarriages—compared to 23% from 1966 to 1975, and 29% from 1976 to 1985.

However, the assumption of constant rise is questionable. Upon closer examination of Table 1, the rising percentages of intermarriage rate indicate a typical S-shaped curve: a slow start, followed by a sharp acceleration, followed in turn again by a slow rise. This represents a flattening or attenuation of the phenomenon. Such curves are typical in the behavioral sciences; learning tasks, sociological movements (e.g., migration), language acquisition and many other developmental behavioral phenomena have similar curve shapes. It seems that there is a relative stabilization of the intermarriage rate in the 1980s, compared to the sharp rise from 1966 to 1975. This stabilization may reflect generational differences. Third generation American Jews show a more marked difference from their second generation parents than they do from their offspring. More evidence reinforcing the stabilization argument is reflected in attitudinal changes toward intermarriage over time in Boston. This will be discussed in a subsequent Research Note of this series.

Conversion Rates

Intermarriage rates include the couples in which the spouse was converted (whether formally or not) to Judaism, as well as those couples in which the spouse is presently non-Jewish. The vast majority of community studies show that the majority of intermarriages are non-conversionary. Out of those who do convert, the majority are formally converted.

In 1985, the conversion rate to Judaism of the not born Jewish spouses in greater Boston was 15%. That is, 15% of the non-Jewish spouses in the intermarried couples were converted; out of those, 90% were formally converted. However, conversion rates are difficult to assess, for the researcher relies only on the respondent’s verbal definition of him/herself (or his/her spouse) as “Jewish,” or as “converted,” with no further probing. The data also indicate that conversion rates have decreased from 40% in 1985, to 17% in 1975, to 15% in 1985.

Such low contemporary conversion rates are not unique to the Boston Jewish community. Conversion rates in New York, for example, with its larger and denser Jewish population, are also low (25%) and are also declining. As will be seen in the subsequent Research Note, conversion plays a major role for Jewish continuity in intermarried households.

Summary

This Research Note has dealt with intermarriage and conversion rates in the greater Boston area, and has focused on three issues.

- Intermarriage rates vary greatly—from about one-tenth to more than one-third—of married couples in different Jewish communities in the United States. Boston was found to be in the lower third of the range.

- In Boston, the overall intermarriage rate in 1985 was 18%, a rise of 5% from 1975, and of 11% from 1965. By examining Boston intermarriage rates based on the year of marriage, we see a definite and troubling rise in intermarriage rates from almost 0% in the 1950s to almost 30% in the 1980s. However, it seems that the accelerated rise in intermarriage rates from 1966 to 1975 has stabilized somewhat in the 1980s, though it is still rising.

- Rates of conversion have decreased in Boston. In 1985, 85% of intermarried households involved a marriage with an unconverted spouse.

Further research is needed to assess the impact of rising rates of intermarriage and declining rates of conversion on the Jewish community and on Jewish identity.

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ISSN 0892-4194
Editors: Sylvia Barack Fishman
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3 See also, Steven M. Cohen, American Assimilation or Jewish Revival? Indiana University Press, 1989.