

## Introduction: Special Issue on Jewish Demography in the United States

Leonard Saxe · Sergio DellaPergola

Published online: 22 February 2013  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

Social scientists played a prominent role in the 2012 United States presidential campaign, both advising candidates on strategy for engaging their base and developing widely discussed narratives about the race between President Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney. One of the most influential narrators was a statistical analyst, Nate Silver, a columnist and blogger for the *New York Times*. His blog, *FiveThirtyEight* (<http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/author/nate-silver/>), provided statistical summaries and analyzed poll data about the presidential race. Along with the poll data, Silver gave probability estimates of the likelihood of each candidate winning. Although routinely excoriated by advocates for candidates who appeared to be losing, his predictions of the election outcome proved to be highly accurate. His methods, as well as his approach to reporting on surveys, are relevant to our study of the socio-demographic state of American Jews.

Key to Silver's approach, developed in his recent book, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don't* (2012) is acknowledging the complexity and the difficulty of predictions. Even with the aid of statistics, prediction of societal trends is difficult. Good prediction is the result of both theory and data, usually multiple forms of data. Silver's cautionary approach is especially relevant in the case of "predicting" the Jewish population of the United States. Because of the nature of Jewish identity—as a religious-ethnic identity that is both ascribed and achieved—as well as the small number of Jews relative to the overall population, US Jews are difficult to locate and track over time. The challenge for socio-demographers of American Jewry is to use survey data and other sources to

---

L. Saxe (✉)  
Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA  
e-mail: saxe@brandeis.edu

S. DellaPergola  
The Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem,  
91905 Mount Scopus, Israel  
e-mail: sergioa@huji.ac.il

answer questions that would normally be established with census studies, where every household is enumerated.

Assessing the size and characteristics of the Jewish population in the United States is probably not the central question that needs to be addressed by American Jewry, but is surely one of the most intriguing, debated, and at times antagonizing tasks—not only in demographic studies but more generally in the social scientific study of Jewry (e.g., *Contemporary Jewry* 2005). Competing narrative and empirical approaches have generated diverging estimates, with a significant high-low gap of about one million, and opposite interpretations of current and expected trends, ranging between rapid growth and slow decline (see DellaPergola 2013; Saxe and Tighe 2013).

In this analytic dissonance, some observers seek to project certain fundamental conceptual assumptions from the top of theory or general proposition down to expected validation from empirical observation. Others express a quest for the understanding of more complex issues starting from relatively simplified observation at bottom and ending up with generalization, theory, and possibly also a different narrative (Marker 2011, November 11; Saxe 2011, November 11; see also a broader discussion in Cohen 2012).

Primarily in the United States, but in other countries as well, the diversity of approaches and dissenting views have helped to produce a wealth of scholarly work that—beyond the specific focus on the Jewish collective—is relevant to understanding the broader realm of diaspora, ethnic, and cultural studies. Along with enriching the social scientific mainstream, however, discourse on these matters sometimes takes on the character of a sports event with two groups of fans supporting their respective teams—cheering not with colorful slogans, but with opposing scholarly papers and op-eds.

Much of the debate in the field has seemed to us tone deaf, with participants neither listening to one another nor learning from one another's perspectives. One goal of this special issue is to promote discussion among key members of the research community and to aid in the development of a larger, more diverse, and complementary epistemic community. This issue emerged from a two-day conference held at Brandeis University in the fall of 2011 (see <http://www.brandeis.edu/ssri/conferences/demographyconf>) and attended by several dozen leading figures in the socio-demographic study of American Jewry. The papers in this volume represent a sample of what was discussed and include:

- \* Contradictory analyses, designed to expand understanding of the complexity of the issues and of an ever-changing nature of the problem;
- \* Different theoretical, conceptual, disciplinary, and technical approaches;
- \* Alternative research methods along with analyses of central subject matter topics.

Although not exhaustive of the full range of US Jewish demography, the papers in this volume provide a broad cross-section of the main issues and positions. The volume opens with a statement by the profession's dean, Sidney Goldstein, who shares his memories—drawn from his direct involvement in some of the major and

more influential studies of American Jewry—and critical assessment of how the investigation of American Jewish demography has evolved over the last several decades. Two lead articles propose contrasting ways to approach American Jewish demography and reach quite different conclusions regarding the current size of the American Jewish population and its underlying processes in recent years. Sergio DellaPergola reviews the more recent research findings from the perspective of demography, in light of the major sources of data spread over more than sixty years, and argues for the necessity of historical coherence and comparability of population results over time. Leonard Saxe and Elizabeth Tighe present the main findings of their major project of several years devoted to a meta-analysis of a large database of American social surveys and describe a program of research that can help to understand and track the identification and demographic patterns of US Jews.

Two more articles suggest more specialized research approaches. Matthew Boxer, Janet Krasner Aronson, and Leonard Saxe call attention to issues of using other sources of data that complement available Jewish and general surveys. Ira Sheskin discusses a wide array of results from tens of Jewish population studies that have been undertaken in different US cities over the last decades and critically reviews the advantages and disadvantages of each major type of survey. The three subsequent papers address different substantive aspects of Jewish population change in the United States. Bruce Phillips brings new light on Jewish intermarriage in the United States in the broader context of the phenomenon in the American population—surely one of the central issues in the Jewish population debate. Finally, two articles review important aspects of migration and integration of Jewish migrants that have significantly affected the US total Jewish population and community. Judit Bokser Liwerant focuses on immigration of Jews from Latin American countries and its unique contribution to the broader American Jewish community in the framework of an overview of the emerging transnational character, linkages, and identity implications of such international mobility. Steven Gold writes about the changing options that stand in front of contemporary Jews compared with the ones they had in the past, with special attention to migration from Israel.

At the center of this symposium stand the two lead articles written by the guest editors of this issue of *Contemporary Jewry*, Leonard Saxe and Sergio DellaPergola, who are affiliated respectively with the Cohen Center and Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis University and the Division of Jewish Demography and Statistics at the Hebrew University's A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry. Both academic institutions share long-standing commitments to the social scientific study of Jewish population and Jewish society more broadly and have produced a large number of publications in the field. It may be surprising that scholars apparently divided in their main assessment of an issue can work together. But the significant differences that emerge in their approaches and conclusions should be understood in the framework of a deeply shared concern for good and systematic research which involves different disciplines and multiple angles.

One main axis in this debate comes from demography. Clearly demography, as a discipline, does not pretend to offer the sole or the best analytic solution to the manifold complexities of society in general, and of the Jewish collective within it in

particular. Indeed, one main goal of scientific research should be a growing incorporation and synergy of several disciplinary perspectives into a multidisciplinary, holistic approach to changing societal realities. But such a multidisciplinary approach cannot exist and succeed without the underlying foundation of distinct and clearly specified disciplinary tools. That demography is a specific discipline with its own set of theories, assumptions, methods, techniques, and policy implications (van Dalen and Henkens 2012), is sometimes forgotten. It also happens that anyone who uses numbers is defined as a *demographer*—sometimes in the absence of specific training or even against that user's own will.

One of demography's main thrusts is the search for intergenerational continuity. Contemporary observations—as long as they are feasible—need to be embedded in an understanding of the possible drivers and consequences of population change. Today's American Jewry is the coherent product of a chain of transformations that run far back into the past, but is also undergoing change even while we attempt to study it. Our demographic task is to understand these trends and to predict the future. A critical understanding of the components of population change (reproduction and survival, international migration, accessions to and secessions from the group studied here) is essential to generating the possible maximum and minimum size, and the composition of an empirically assessed Jewish population. Inherent in these processes is a changing definitional paradigm for American Jews which nonetheless does not imply that comparisons over time should not be undertaken within coherent and recognizable criteria. The results of such an effort of reconstruction and evaluation, based on all available evidence, are presented in this volume by DellaPergola.

The perspective of the other co-editor, Saxe, is in some ways the mirror image of DellaPergola. Although recognizing how demographic predictions are rooted in phenomena such as birth and immigration, Saxe's conceptual focus is on social change and how the conditions that lead individuals to claim or not claim their Jewish identities evolve. Thus, although Jewish births twenty or more years ago are important drivers of the current adult population, hosts of other dynamics are also critical to assess the population. For example, the 1983 decision of the Reform movement in America to accept patrilineal descent, followed by efforts in the last two decades to welcome interfaith families in synagogues, has potentially significant impact on American Jewry. Similarly, ongoing patterns of Jewish immigration—from the Former Soviet Union, Israel, and Latin America—also have the potential to change the population. Finally, new efforts of Jewish socialization, like the ones emerging from the Taglit-Birthright Israel initiative (Saxe and Chazan 2008) have the potential to rejuvenate and strengthen the present and future demography of US Jewry. We do not, as yet, have the data to answer some of the key questions about these socio-demographic shifts, but doing so is an important reason for the Jewish community to invest in research.

To some extent, but not entirely, some of these diverging conclusions can be reconciled by acknowledging that all empirical work conducted on the basis of population sampling is always subject to error—even assuming that the best techniques were employed by the best analysts. In this respect, the top of the range of variation of the Jewish population estimate suggested by one researcher

significantly approaches the bottom of the range suggested by another researcher. Yet, the two ranges do not really overlap, and the interpretations of the overall demographic trend and its policy implications remain different.

Readers are invited to engage with the editors and authors to consider these analytic and disciplinary alternatives in order to assess the merits of the arguments made by the authors of each of the papers. This collection is not intended as the final word in Jewish population research. To the contrary, our hope is that the approaches and findings discussed here will stimulate new thinking and research, including work by a host of younger and gifted scholars.

Although the primary audience for this volume is our social scientific colleagues, we also believe that the discussion should be of import and use to the leadership of the Jewish community. Socio-demographic research is meaningful, both for the sake of scientific curiosity and for its value as a framework to plan and evaluate Jewish community services. American Jewry needs national communal leadership with sufficient vision and strength to seek and use social scientific expertise, to support sustained investment in research and development, to undertake high-quality nationwide studies, and to have the sophistication to understand and utilize complex research. We are concerned that some communal leaders have supported research only to the extent that it validates their already developed positions. To use a Nate Silver metaphor, discourse about the changing American Jewish community has been dominated by “noise rather than by signal.” Too often good research has been shelved without extracting from it all the relevant information it could yield.

Like the political campaigns described by Nate Silver that fund research that shows their candidates’ success and ignores contrary information, such approaches are short-sighted (Saxe 2012). As social scientists, we acknowledge that promoting high-quality social research is self-serving, but we believe that knowledge-based conduct of American Jewish affairs is a necessity (Saxe and Chertok, in press). And all of this without forgetting that American Jewry is an integral part of a global Jewish community with which it constantly interacts, which it significantly influences, and without which its supposed uniqueness cannot exist (DellaPergola 2011). The future vibrancy of the US Jewish community rests, not marginally, on our ability to leverage knowledge and understanding about who we are, how the community is changing, and what its needs are.

We hope that this volume of *Contemporary Jewry* will make a serious and useful contribution to elucidating the issues and to stimulating the quest for more and better knowledge. By stressing the complexity and plurality of the issues, the papers collected in this volume will hopefully provide a necessary and stimulating reference toward further continuing efforts to document and understand Jewish population trends and size in the United States.

## References

- Cohen, Steven M. 2012. The demise of the “Good Jew”: Marshall Sklare Award Lecture. *Contemporary Jewry* 32(1): 85–93.
- Contemporary Jewry*. 2005. Special issue on NJPS 2002 [sic]. *Contemporary Jewry* 25.

- DellaPergola, Sergio. 2011. *Jewish demographic policies: Population trends and options in Israel and in the Diaspora*. Jerusalem: Jewish People Policy Institute.
- DellaPergola, Sergio. 2013. How many Jews in the United States? The demographic perspective. *Contemporary Jewry* 33 (1).
- Marker, David. 2011, November 11. Jews need count, not wishful thinking: Despite flaws, surveys needed to offer picture of community. *Forward*.
- Saxe, Leonard. 2011, November 11. Who are American Jews? Demographers seek to answer questions about community. *Forward*.
- Saxe, Leonard. 2012. Reflections on the science of the scientific study of Jewry: Marshall Sklare Award Lecture. Paper presented at the Association for Jewish Studies Conference, Chicago.
- Saxe, Leonard, and Barry Chazan. 2008. *Ten days of Birthright Israel: A journey in young adult identity*. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England.
- Saxe, Leonard, and Fern Chertok. in press. "AAA" guide to developing and using knowledge to drive Jewish communal policy. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*.
- Saxe, Leonard, and Elizabeth Tighe. 2013. Estimating and understanding the Jewish population in the United States: A program of research. *Contemporary Jewry* 33 (1).
- Silver, Nate. 2012. *The signal and the noise: Why so many predictions fail—but some don't*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- van Dalen, Hendrik P., and Kène Henkens. 2012. What is on a demographer's mind? A world-wide survey. *Demographic Research* 26: 363–408.