

# AUTHENTIC FACTS AND COMMUNAL FALLACIES: Social Research and the American Jewish Community

by JONATHAN D. SARNA



In September 1908, Commissioner Theodore A. Bingham of the New York Police shocked the Jewish community by reporting that “perhaps half” of the city’s criminals were Jews, even though Jews comprised but a quarter of the city’s population. His blockbuster article on “Foreign Criminals in New York” went on to characterize immigrant Jews as “burglars, firebugs, pickpockets and highway robbers.”

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Following a barrage of criticism, including the publication of statistics suggesting that Jews actually committed fewer crimes than non-Jews, the commissioner withdrew his inflammatory charges and apologized. The figures he used, he explained, “were furnished me by others and were, unfortunately, assumed to be correct. It now appears, however, that these figures were unreliable.”

The Bingham incident highlighted the growing importance of statistics in twentieth-century American Jewish communal life. The very fact that the Police Commissioner employed statistical data, historian Arthur Goren shows in *New York Jews and the Quest for Community*,

invested his words “with an aura of objectivity and authority.” Since Revolutionary times, Americans had celebrated the importance of accurate numbers as being “authentic facts.” Americans embraced numbers, Patricia Cline Cohen explains in her book, *A Calculating People*, “because they were genuinely useful, because they were thought to discipline the mind, because they marked the progress of the era, and because they were reputedly objective and precise and hence tantamount to truth.” The hope was that if everyone possessed “authentic facts,” all thinking people would reach the same policy conclusions, and harmony would prevail.

American Jews, too, had come to believe in the efficacy of statistics. In 1880, influenced by European precedents, they published the first census of the American Jewish community, counting Jews, synagogues, synagogue members, the value of communal property and the number of Jews attending religious school. Nineteen years later, they established the *American Jewish Year Book*, designed to provide Jews with the facts needed in order to “grapple successfully

with the large problems of the Jewish situation.” The very

year that Bingham made his

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charges, in 1908, the *Year Book* carried a promise to supply “facts without color or prejudice” in response to nativist efforts to restrict immigration.

But as the Bingham incident demonstrated, that was easier said than done. In the case of crime, for example, statisticians were bedeviled by such irresolvable problems as how to identify who is a Jew and whether Jews were more likely to be criminals or simply more likely to be arrested. Perhaps, some prescient critics suggested, criminality was less related to religion and ethnicity than to class — the fact that so many Jews at the time were recent immigrants and poor. Others noticed that statistics on those serving

time in local jails failed to confirm a high rate of Jewish criminality, and actually implied the opposite. An elaborate study that controlled for age, population size, and location likewise seemed to prove that Jews were *less* prone to crime than native-born Americans. In short, what had seemed, at first glance, to be an “authentic fact” turned out upon close examination to be highly complicated and somewhat dubious. Bingham’s apology seemed to admit as much.

Nevertheless, we know, looking back, that crime was a serious problem within the Jewish community. If anything, the debate over the precise number of Jewish criminals diverted attention from the community’s long history of ignoring the unseemly Jewish underground that had developed in its midst. This “earlier reluctance to confront Jewish criminality head-on” actually “fostered conditions in which a Jewish underworld could take root and flourish,” historian Jenna W. Joselit has concluded.

The decades following 1908 witnessed ever greater efforts on the part of American Jews to quantify the problems that they faced. The first “Community Survey of Jewish Education in New York City,” prepared by Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson, shocked the Jewish community when it was presented in 1910. Concluding that between 75 and 80 percent of New York’s Jewish children received no formal Jewish education at all and many of the rest faced educational conditions so poor as to be counterproductive, the survey galvanized the Jewish community to action and set the stage for a revolution in Jewish education “to preserve Jewish life in this country.” Jewish educational reformers, led by Samson Benderly, successfully appealed to statistics to generate increased funds for their pedagogic initiatives.

In 1919, taking their cue from urban reformers across the United States, Jewish leaders established an independent Bureau of Jewish Social Research to employ the “best standards in every phase of social endeavor” and to find the “best solution” to the “many problems” of the Jewish community “still awaiting attention.” Through the years, the Bureau and its successors produced a blizzard of valuable data concerning Jewish demography, religious life, education, culture and philanthropy. These “authentic facts,” many of them published in the

*American Jewish Year Book* and now available online at [www.ajcarchives.org](http://www.ajcarchives.org), sometimes spurred leaders to remedial action, but often failed to translate into effective policies.

Sometimes data was skewed for apologetic purposes. In 1927, for example, the Bureau reported that Jews were “widely distributed within the states” and could be found in almost 10,000 different locations across the country. While this warmed the hearts of those who feared that American Jews crowded too closely together, it concealed the fact that 90 percent of all Jews lived in the North and almost 70 percent were concentrated in but eleven major cities.

At other times, the community simply ignored important data. In 1950, for example, a demographer named Ben Seligman warned of the “continuous aging of the Jewish population, a process which appears to be more marked than in the general population in this country.” Nobody paid any attention, although 50 years later we know how right he was. Similarly, in 1959, a non-Jewish demographer named Donald J. Bogue reported that “American Jews were scarcely reproducing themselves.” That warning too fell on deaf ears.

What did shock the community, perhaps more than any statistic had since Commissioner Bingham’s report on Jewish criminality, was the 1990 National Jewish Population Study’s data concerning intermarriage. “In recent years,” that survey reported, “just over half of Born Jews who married, at any age, whether for the first time or not, chose a spouse who was born a Gentile and has remained so.” Since 1985, it calculated, “twice as many mixed couples (Born Jew with Gentile spouse) have been created as Jewish couples.”

As with the report on Jewish criminality so many years before, the statistics themselves soon became the issue. “Authentic facts” about intermarriage turned out to be far more complex and debatable than initially recognized. One wonders, however, whether the clamorous debate over the precise number of intermarrieds diverted attention from the very real problems that underlay those contested numbers. Will future historians conclude that American Jews found it easier to argue about statistics, or even ignore them altogether, than to face up to the daunting challenges that those statistics bared? 🌸