

Ira M. Sheskin

The Usefulness of Local Jewish Community Studies in Examining the American Jewish Future¹

More than 50 American Jewish federations completed local Jewish community studies from 1993 to 2010. Below examples are cited of how the results of these studies have been utilized to guide Jewish community decision-making.

The North American Jewish Data Bank (www.jewishdatabank.org) archives about 200 local Jewish community studies. Fifty-four such studies have been completed since 1993, based on over 53,000 random telephone interviews at a combined cost of \$8–10 million. The vast majority of these interviews took 15–20 minutes. They covered diverse topics, including the geographic distribution of the Jewish population, migration patterns, basic demographics—such as age, marital status, and income—religiosity, intermarriage, memberships in synagogues, Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), and Jewish organizations, levels of Jewish education, familiarity with and perception of Jewish agencies, social service needs, Israel, anti-Semitism, use of the Jewish and general media, philanthropic giving, voting patterns, and many other topics. About 75 percent of the American Jewish population lives in the more than 50 Jewish communities that have completed local Jewish community studies. Of the 25 largest American Jewish communities, only one (Rockland County, New York) has not completed a study.

Almost all local Jewish community studies have collected information for three main purposes. The first purpose is to provide data that will direct and focus the organized Jewish community in providing services and programs that will contribute to its development and will offer compelling reasons for Jews to maintain their Jewish identity as well as be active members of the community. The second purpose is to assist the organized Jewish community in actualizing its goals by providing data useful in its decision-making, ranging from prioritizing its objectives, to funding agencies, programs, and institutions, to the undertaking of capital campaigns, to making relevant policy decisions, and to best providing social, cultural, recreational, and educational services to that community. The third purpose is to assist Jewish federations and other Jewish organizations in financial resource development.

The overriding question is whether local Jewish community studies have proved useful to the Jewish communities completing them. To answer this, a number of concrete examples are given below.

Addressing National Issues

The results of local Jewish community studies have been employed in addressing national concerns in three areas:

- 1) examining consistent correlations between behaviors measured in local Jewish community studies in support of national programming efforts;
- 2) providing guidance as to the extent to which given situations are prevalent nationally; and
- 3) providing large sample sizes—that would be unobtainable from a typical national study—for small geographic areas that have relevance at the national level.

Addressing Local Issues

Communities typically spend between \$100,000 and \$250,000 on a local Jewish community study. Respondents are generally willing to cooperate by donating only a limited amount of time for a telephone survey; usually a 15–20-minute time frame for the questionnaire is the goal.

There are at least ten areas in which local Jewish community study results have been utilized by local Jewish communities to shed light on local Jewish community issues. Examples are: 1) changing Jewish population size; 2) changing geographic distribution of the Jewish population; 3) place of birth; 4) age distributions; 5) Jewish continuity; 6) intermarriage; 7) synagogue membership; 8) Jewish preschool; 9) anti-Semitism; and 10) Israel.

Example I: Changing Jewish Population Size

Detroit has a large, but decreasing, Jewish population, which was confirmed by the 2005 Detroit local community study. Thus, planning in Detroit should occur in an environment that assumes a continuing decrease in the Jewish population. The strong attachments of many Jews to this area suggested by other findings in the study provide evidence that the current decrease will probably not continue forever.

Las Vegas presents an entirely different scenario. The 2005 Las Vegas Jewish community study² found 89,000 persons in 42,000 Jewish households of whom 67,500 persons (76 percent) are Jewish. From 1995 to 2005, the number of *Jewish households* increased by 44 percent. Assuming that the prevailing rate of in-migration continued in the following few years, these data suggest that the number of Jewish households in Las Vegas was increasing and would probably continue to increase during the next few years as a result of migration into and

out of Las Vegas. Thus, planning should occur in an environment that assumes a continuing increase in the Jewish population.

Does this mean that Detroit should not be looking to add capital facilities and programs and services while Las Vegas should? The answer is, probably not. In fact, many other results in these two studies show that Detroit has a population far more connected to Judaism than does Las Vegas, and that any type of Jewish facility or programming may have a better chance of success in Detroit than in Las Vegas.

Were the Jewish communities in Detroit and Las Vegas aware—prior to receiving the results of their studies—that their Jewish populations were decreasing and increasing respectively? Yes, they were. However, the Detroit Jewish community had assumed that their decrease was far more severe than it was. Las Vegas Jewish community leaders, on the other hand, had been touting that theirs was the fastest-growing Jewish community in the country and estimating a Jewish population in excess of 100,000. These assumptions proved exaggerated.

Example II: Geographically Shifting and Stable Jewish Populations

A significant geographic shift in the location of the Jewish population occurred in West Palm Beach from 1987 to 2005.³ The percentage of persons in Jewish households in West Palm Beach who live in Boynton Beach increased from 12 percent in 1987 to 37 percent in 1999 and 43 percent in 2005 (from 9,250 persons to 37,300 persons to 58,600 persons). Together, the two southern geographic areas (Boynton Beach and Lake Worth) increased from 40 percent in 1987 to 59 percent in 1999 and 63 percent in 2005. Over the same time period, and in stark contrast, the percentage of persons in Jewish households who live in the central area decreased from 33 percent in 1987 to 13 percent in 1999 and 8 percent in 2005.

The problem created by this shift in the geographic location of the Jewish population is that the main campus for this community—which includes the Jewish federation, the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Service, the Jewish day school, and various other agencies—is located in the central area, where the population is decreasing. Boynton Beach/Lake Worth, where the Jewish population is exploding, has been served by a relatively small facility.

In contrast to the shifting Jewish population of West Palm Beach, the geographic distribution of the Jewish population of Bergen County, New Jersey was shown by their 2001 study not to have changed significantly since 1994.⁴ In Bergen, therefore, planning should occur in an environment that assumes no significant changes in the geographic location of Jewish households.

Clearly, communities need to be aware of changes in the local geographic distribution of their Jewish population. In fact, concern about the current

locations of community facilities or decisions about where to locate a proposed new community facility often prompt a community to undertake a study. If a capital facility is not optimally located then it may be underutilized, while needs remain unmet in other parts of a Jewish federation's service area. Thus tens of millions of dollars might be wasted.

Example III: Place of Birth

About 40 local Jewish community studies have asked the place of birth of adults in Jewish households. Two statistics derive from this question: the percentage of adults in Jewish households born locally and the percentage foreign-born.

The percentage born locally varies from 0 percent in South Palm Beach and 1 percent in Las Vegas and Sarasota to 57 percent in Cleveland and Detroit, and 59 percent in New York. The median value is 24 percent. Jewish communities with a high percentage of locally born adults, mostly in the Northeast and the Midwest, have an advantage in community building over those in the South and the West. Adults who were born in an area feel more of an attachment to it and its institutions than do adults who have recently moved to an area.

Example IV: Age Distributions

All local Jewish community studies ask the age of all persons in Jewish households. A population's age distribution is among the most important demographic indicators and is a major determinant of the types of programs a Jewish community must offer. Age is related to everything from the need for preschools, Jewish day schools, supplemental schools, and nursing-home beds to levels of religious observance, synagogue membership, and levels of philanthropy.

The 2005 Detroit study⁵ showed that a decrease in Jewish day school enrollment was likely due to a decreasing number of children. In San Antonio,⁶ some community members were considering an expansion of the Jewish day school until they were presented with the results of the study showing that 7.0 percent of persons in Jewish households were age 10–14; 5.9 percent were age 5–9; and 3.7 percent were age 0–4.

The age distribution in West Palm Beach in 2005 showed that 57 percent of persons in Jewish households were age 65 and over.⁷ This figure is the second highest of about 45 comparison Jewish communities. The 9 percent who are age 0–17 is the lowest of about 50 comparison Jewish communities. Thus, while no one would argue that children are not a priority, no matter how small their percentage of the Jewish population, these results clearly indicate that this community must prioritize services for its elderly.

Example V: Jewish Continuity

The most important issue facing the American Jewish community today is that of Jewish continuity. All local Jewish community studies indicate that some percentage of any given community is for the most part disassociated. Yet, some communities face a more severe situation than others. This contrast can be seen by comparing the results from the Las Vegas 2005 study with those from the Detroit 2005 study.

Overall, the level of Jewish religious practice in Las Vegas is lower than in almost every other comparison Jewish community.⁸ Among about 35–50 comparison Jewish communities, Las Vegas has the lowest percentage of households who always or usually participate in a Passover Seder (50 percent) and always or usually light Sabbath candles (11 percent). Las Vegas also has the third highest percentage of Jewish households who always, usually, or sometimes have a Christmas tree in their home (34 percent).

While 83 percent of Jewish households in Las Vegas are involved in Judaism in some way, either through religious practice, synagogue attendance, membership in the organized Jewish community, or Jewish philanthropic giving in the past year, this is the lowest percentage of about 35 comparison Jewish communities. Thus, significant efforts are needed in Las Vegas to engage Jewish households in Jewish life.

The issue of Jewish continuity in Detroit presents a very different picture.⁹ On almost all measures of “Jewishness,” Detroit is one of the most “Jewish” Jewish communities in the country. Among about 35–50 comparison Jewish communities, Detroit has the second highest percentage of respondents who keep kosher in and out of the home (14 percent) and who refrain from using electricity on the Sabbath (10 percent). Households under age 35 in Detroit have stronger Jewish identities than is true of most Jewish communities.

However, in many ways, Detroit is a *bifurcated* community, in which many households maintain a significant degree of commitment to their Jewish identity while others clearly consider their Jewish identity of somewhat marginal importance.

Thus, Las Vegas and Detroit show significantly different patterns with respect to Jewish continuity. While both communities will no doubt make Jewish continuity programming a high priority, the case may be more compelling for diverting funds from social service provision—the historic mission of the Jewish federation movement—to Jewish continuity programming in Las Vegas than in Detroit.

Example VI: Intermarriage

More than 50 local Jewish community studies have asked questions that facilitate the calculation of an intermarriage rate. The percentage of married couples in the

Jewish community who are intermarried (the *couples intermarriage rate*) varies from 9 percent in South Palm Beach to 50 percent in Atlanta, 55 percent in San Francisco and Seattle, and 61 percent in Portland (ME). The median value is 33 percent. Depending on its specific intermarriage rate, each community will make its own decision regarding the emphasis it places on efforts to provide outreach to, and integration of, intermarried couples.

Local Jewish community studies assist in community-specific policymaking and program design. Many communities concerned about their intermarriage rate focus on younger couples. Unlike in most other Jewish communities, programs to integrate intermarried couples into the Portland Jewish community should be directed not just at the young, but at all age groups.

For many years, some in the Jewish community maintained that although intermarriage was increasing, many intermarried couples were well integrated into the Jewish community. However, while many intermarried couples have at least some Jewish activity evident in their household, on individual measures, intermarried households are generally much less connected to Judaism than are in-married households.

Each synagogue and Jewish organization needs to develop its own policies and programs for grappling with the issue of intermarriage. Jewish identity initiatives must carefully balance “outreach” to the intermarried population with “in-reach” to moderately affiliated Jews. This balance should no doubt be influenced by the extent of intermarriage in each community and should be informed by the overall lower levels of Jewish involvement of intermarried households.

Example VII: Synagogue Membership

More than 50 local Jewish community studies have asked whether households are current members of a synagogue. Synagogue membership varies from 14 percent in Las Vegas to 56 percent in Essex-Morris, St. Louis, and St. Paul, and 58 percent in Tidewater. The median value is 45 percent. Depending on its specific synagogue membership rate, a community campaign designed to increase membership has more potential to succeed in some communities than in others.

While a membership campaign might prove fruitful in Tucson, for instance, Tidewater (Norfolk and Virginia Beach) is less likely to benefit from such an effort.¹⁰ Synagogue membership there is high despite relatively low to average levels of home religious practice and synagogue attendance. Tidewater, being a typical southern community, is highly “churched.” There, joining the “Jewish church” is a form of “assimilation.” San Antonio exhibits a similar pattern.

The relationship between household income and synagogue membership suggests that cost may be an important factor limiting membership. Such relationships are seen for almost all of the comparison Jewish communities,

suggesting that the “cost of being Jewish” is a significant barrier for many and that policies to reduce this cost might prove fruitful.

Example VIII: Jewish Preschool

More than 30 local Jewish community studies have asked whether children age 0–5 in surveyed households were enrolled in a preschool or child care program and, if so, whether it was a Jewish program. The *Jewish Preschool/Child Care Market Share (market share)* is defined as the percentage of Jewish children age 0–5 in a preschool/child care program attending a *Jewish* preschool/child care program. *Market share* varies from 5 percent in Seattle, 25 percent in Philadelphia, to 92 percent in San Antonio. The median value is 55 percent.

Enrollment of Jewish children in preschool/child care programs within the Jewish community is often utilized as an entry opportunity to involve young families in Jewish life, and particularly in synagogue life, prior to enrolling their children in a religious school.

The preschool example illustrates the importance of comparing local Jewish community studies with one another. Without the comparison with 30 other Jewish communities, planners in Rhode Island might have concluded that their 33 percent market share was good. With the realization that 26 other Jewish communities had higher market shares, it became clear to planners that Rhode Island should be doing far better in this area.

Example IX: Anti-Semitism

Fourteen percent of Jewish respondents in San Antonio personally experienced anti-Semitism in the local community in the past year, which is about average among about 30 comparison Jewish communities.¹¹ The 26 percent of San Antonio respondents who perceive a great or moderate amount of anti-Semitism in the local community is the second lowest of about 30 comparison Jewish communities.

The percentage of children age 6–17 experiencing anti-Semitism in the past year varies from 8 percent in Washington and 9 percent in Miami, South Palm Beach, and Tucson to 34 percent in San Antonio. The median value is 18 percent. The 34 percent result for children in San Antonio was surprising and suggested that the Jewish community should consider discussing this issue with local school boards. The local Jewish day school should also make parents aware of this result, as it provides an additional reason for parents to send their children to a Jewish day school.

Anti-Semitism also shows itself to be a major factor motivating donations to Jewish organizations. This motivation derives not so much from respondents

personally experiencing anti-Semitism, but from a perception that anti-Semitism is extant in the local community. The percentage of adults who personally experienced anti-Semitism in the past year varies from 7 percent in South Palm Beach, 9 percent in West Palm Beach, and 11 percent in Atlantic County, Broward, and Sarasota to 31 percent in Orlando. The median value is 17 percent.

While data on this question are not available for previous generations, it is probably fair to say that during the first 70–80 years of the twentieth century an overwhelming percentage of Jews probably would have reported personally experiencing anti-Semitism.

Thus, the motivation for donating as a result of anti-Semitism is almost certainly derived from the perception of anti-Semitism as a significant problem. The perception of a great deal or moderate amount of anti-Semitism probably explains why, in about 20 comparison Jewish communities, when presented with a list of reasons that Jewish households donate to Jewish organizations combating anti-Semitism is usually ranked as the number one or number two motivation. These results suggest that Jewish federation marketing might do well to emphasize those aspects of its mission related to exposing and combating anti-Semitism.

Example X: Israel

About 35 Jewish community studies have asked if any household member has visited Israel. The percentage of households in which a member visited Israel varies from 26 percent in York (Pennsylvania) and 33 percent in Las Vegas to 60 percent in Los Angeles, 61 percent in South Palm Beach, and 62 percent in Bergen and Miami. The median value is 43 percent.

On most measures of Jewish identity—such as religious practice, synagogue attendance, membership in the organized Jewish community, and Jewish philanthropy and volunteerism—all local Jewish community studies show a significant positive correlation with visits to Israel, particularly if the Israel trip was sponsored by a Jewish organization, although cause and effect cannot be attributed to these relationships.

In Las Vegas, the 36 percent of Jewish respondents who are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel is the third lowest of about 30 comparison Jewish communities.¹² Fundraising efforts to support Israel programming should consider the relatively low level of emotional attachment in Las Vegas, and efforts are needed to promote greater levels of attachment to Israel. Organized programs should be considered that bring together emotionally attached participants who have visited Israel in the past with less involved Jews.

The percentage of households containing a child who has visited Israel varies in about 40 comparison Jewish communities from 4 percent in Charlotte, St. Petersburg, and West Palm Beach and 6 percent in Atlantic County, Los Angeles,

and Wilmington to 18 percent in Monmouth and St. Paul, 20 percent in Detroit, 27 percent in Miami, and 33 percent in Bergen. The median value is 11 percent. Communities toward the lower end of this range can be seen as having a mandate for expanding programs to increase the percentage of children who have visited Israel.

In about 20 comparison Jewish communities, when presented with a list of motivations for Jewish households to donate to Jewish organizations—providing social services for the Jewish elderly; combating anti-Semitism; providing Jewish education for children; supporting the people of Israel; helping Jews overseas who are in distress; providing Jewish individual and family counseling; providing social, recreational, and cultural activities for Jews; and supporting educational trips to Israel—supporting the people of Israel is usually shown to be a moderate motivator, while supporting educational trips to Israel is invariably the lowest. This suggests to the Jewish federation campaign departments that motivating donations by emphasizing the federation's role in funding educational trips to Israel is not as effective as emphasizing the Jewish federation's roles in meeting local needs or in its support for the people of Israel.¹³

Conclusion

No doubt community studies will continue, as will the questioning of the expenditures involved. As evidenced by the numerous communities that have completed studies, including almost all of the large communities, arguments about cost and accuracy do not win the day. Rather, American Jewish communities are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of sound planning based upon a scientific assessment of the environment in which they operate.

Most importantly, in the context of the current volume, while most discussions of the American Jewish future examine national data, an important implication of this examination of some of the findings of local Jewish community studies is that there is not one future for the American Jewish community. Rather, that future, and the planning that is necessary to try to assure a positive future, differs significantly by community. The demographic variations among local Jewish communities present varying challenges to these communities. The differences in levels of Jewish continuity among communities imply that varying levels of effort will be necessary in different Jewish communities to assure that future.

Notes

1. For a more detailed analysis, see Ira M. Sheskin, "Local Jewish Community Studies as Planning Tools for the American Jewish Community," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, vol. 21, nos. 1–2 (Spring 2009).

2. Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas: Milton I. Schwartz Hebrew Academy and United Jewish Communities of Las Vegas, 2007).
3. Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Palm Beach County* (West Palm Beach: Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, 2006).
4. Ira M. Sheskin, *The UJA Federation of Bergen County and North Hudson Community Study* (River Edge, NJ: UJA Federation of Bergen County and North Hudson, 2002).
5. Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Detroit* (Detroit: Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, 2007).
6. Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of San Antonio* (San Antonio: Jewish Federation of San Antonio, 2007).
7. Sheskin, *Jewish Community Study of Palm Beach County*.
8. Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Community Study of Southern Nevada* (Las Vegas: Milton I. Schwartz Hebrew Academy and United Jewish Communities of Las Vegas, 2007).
9. Sheskin, *Jewish Community Study of Detroit*.
10. Ira M. Sheskin, *The United Jewish Federation of Tidewater Community Study* (Virginia Beach: United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, 2002).
11. Sheskin, *Jewish Community Study of San Antonio*.
12. Sheskin, *Jewish Community Study of Southern Nevada*.
13. Ira M. Sheskin, *The Jewish Federation of Rhode Island Community Study* (Providence: Jewish Federation of Rhode Island, 2003).