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Study: Jewish numbers on rise

6.4 million in the US, Brandeis team estimates

**By Elise Kigner
Advocate Staff**

Brandeis Professor Leonard Saxe has some good news for those fearing for the future of Judaism in America.

The number of American Jews is actually increasing, not decreasing.

A Brandeis team estimates the total US Jewish population at 6.4 million as of 2010, up from 5.7 million in 2000, and 5.5 million in 1990.

The team's findings contrast with the downward trend in numbers estimated by the National Jewish Population Survey, which was sponsored by the Jewish Federations of North America.

"This notion that we are about to perish has long been a central motif," said Saxe, director of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis. "What now is clear is we are a lot stronger than we may have thought – at least there is a lot more interest in being Jewish than people thought."

Saxe attributed the population growth to immigration from the former Soviet Union as well as to educational programs, including Birthright, that have inspired more people to identify with their Jewish roots.

Saxe also noted that more spouses and children in intermarried families are calling themselves Jewish. He pointed, for example, to the 2005 Boston Community Survey, which found 60 percent of the children of intermarried parents were being raised as Jews. The survey, which was sponsored by Combined Jewish Philanthropies, used as its standard that the children were receiving some form of Jewish education.

Saxe said the current numbers suggest efforts to build the Jewish community are working, and organizations should take note.

"In some ways," he said, "the ball is now in the court of Jewish organizations to tap into this interest in being Jewish."

The Brandeis report came out about the time the Jewish Federations of North America typically releases its population survey. After having conducted the National Jewish Population Survey in 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000, the federations decided against funding another one for 2010.

Saxe said population numbers are useful in determining the percentage of Jews who belong to synagogues, take Birthright trips and obtain a Jewish education.

Getting these numbers, however, can be tricky. The US Census does not ask about religion.

But even if it did, there would be the vexing question of who counts as Jewish.

Poll

Do you agree with last month's Supreme Court ruling that largely protects religious institutions from discrimination suits by employees whose jobs include religious duties?:

- ☐ Yes.
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The Conservative and Orthodox movements only recognize matrilineal descent, while the Reform and Reconstructionist believe Jewish identity can be passed through the mother or the father.

Israel's Law of Return applies to anyone with a Jewish grandparent, or who is married to someone with one Jewish grandparent. But Israel's Orthodox Rabbinate, which has authority over marriages and divorces in Israel, has a stricter definition.

To arrive at its overall estimate of 6.4 million Jews, the Brandeis team included both those who identify themselves as Jews by religion

(4.2 million adults) and those who identify themselves as Jewish because of something other than religion (650,000 adults). The team then added in an estimate of Jewish children, by extrapolating from demographic data and by looking at enrollment figures for Jewish education.

Essentially, the Brandeis team counted people as Jewish if they called themselves Jewish, because of their religion or culture. Among those who did not count: those who said they didn't identify themselves as Jewish even if they had a Jewish parent or were raised in a Jewish family.

The Brandeis team mined data from nearly 150 independent sources, including surveys on a wide range of political and social issues conducted by nonprofits, journalists, universities and government agencies.

To qualify for the Brandeis study, the survey had to be based on a nationally representative sampling of the adult US population and include a breakdown of respondents by religion as well by such other demographic information as sex, race, education and age.

Some of the surveys sought more specific information, such as the religion in which respondents were raised and the religious and/or ethnic affiliation of their parents. Some posed broader questions, such as "Do you consider yourself Jewish?"

Most of the surveys were conducted through calls to land-lines, but Saxe said the best surveys used more than one method of sampling people.

The studies analyzed were weighted using multiple approaches, taking into account the number of respondents, and the likelihood of respondents identifying their religion as Jewish.

Saxe said the big sample size made the Brandeis analysis more accurate than the National Jewish Population Survey – and less expensive. The last NJPS was conducted through phone interviews that screened people to see if they were Jewish through a series of questions about their religion, their religious upbringing and their parents' religion. Those deemed Jewish were then asked a wide range of questions about the depth of their religious and organizational affiliation, as well as that of family members.

Another population estimate released this winter, this one coming out of the North American Jewish Data Bank at the University of Connecticut, found a similar population total to the Brandeis study: 6.6 million. That survey was conducted by Ira Sheskin, a human geographer at the University of Miami, and Arnold Dashefsky, a sociologist at the University of Connecticut.

NJPS cost \$6 million to conduct; Saxe estimated the Brandeis study cost a tenth of that.

The report summary concludes: "Our goal is simple: to improve the validity and utility of data about the American Jewish population at a reasonable cost."

To view the report, "Estimating the Jewish Population of the United States: 2000-2010," visit Brandeis.edu/SSRI.

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