

NJPS 2000-01 Methodology Series

UJC Research Department

Report #2

Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU): Reconciling Estimates from NJPS and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)

I. Introduction

Findings from the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 (NJPS) reveal a total of 252,000 adult American Jews who were born in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and immigrated to the United States since 1970.

In contrast, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) reports that it helped resettle 402,000 refugees from the Former Soviet Union from 1970 to 2001.

In order to reconcile the numbers, several factors must be taken into account on both the NJPS and HIAS sides of the ledger, including definitional and classification issues, children of immigrants born in the FSU, non-Jewish family members of immigrants and mortality.

II. Adjustments to the NJPS estimate of FSU Jews

A. Definition of "Jews" from the FSU

The NJPS figure of 252,000 immigrants from the FSU counts those classified as Jews according to UJC's definition of who is a Jew. According to UJC's definition, a Jew is defined as a person:

1. whose religion is Jewish, OR
2. whose religion is Jewish and something else, OR
3. who has no religion and has at least one Jewish parent or a Jewish upbringing, OR
4. who has a non-monotheistic religion, and has at least one Jewish parent or a Jewish upbringing

In addition to interviewing and estimating the population of Jews according to the definition above, NJPS interviewed and estimated the population of "People of Jewish Background" (PJBs).

PJBs include those who have a monotheistic religion (i.e., Christianity, or in rare cases, Islam) and have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish. It is appropriate to include PJBs in the FSU Jewish population because Jewish background, and the fear of persecution it brought, would have been one of the criteria used for seeking to leave the FSU and enter the U.S. According to NJPS, the total number of adult PJBs who immigrated from the FSU since 1970 is 9,000, bringing the total number of adult Jews and PJBs from the FSU to 261,000.

B. Children

NJPS asked about the place of birth and, where appropriate, immigration to the United States only of adult respondents and their spouses/partners. The NJPS figure of 261,000 FSU immigrants therefore only includes adults, as represented by the respondents.

The HIAS figures, however, include children. Therefore, children 17 or younger who were born in the FSU need to be added to the NJPS number in order to make the NJPS and HIAS figures comparable.

The NJPS questionnaire did not ask directly about the birthplace of immigrant children, but it is still possible to deduce this information. An analysis of the households of adult FSU immigrants (both Jews and PJBs) shows there are 20,000 children whose ages indicate they were born prior to the adult immigrant's arrival in the United States. Adding these children to the adult population brings the NJPS estimate of the total population of Jews and PJBs who immigrated from the FSU to the U.S. since 1970 to 281,000.

III. Adjustments to the reported HIAS number of FSU immigrants

A. Mortality

NJPS 2000-01 identifies FSU-born Jews and PJBs who were alive during the survey's fieldwork period from August 2000 until August 2001. In contrast, the HIAS figure of 402,000 covers a 31-year period of immigrant arrival. The HIAS number includes those who are still alive as well as those who died after their arrival in the United States and therefore could not have been counted in NJPS. Mortality among the immigrant population must be accounted for in order to make the NJPS and HIAS numbers comparable.

A rough annual mortality estimate of any given group is 1% of its total population. Using a spreadsheet, a 1% mortality rate was applied to the yearly changing base of FSU refugees according to the HIAS figures. In other words, 1% of the first year's immigrants were subtracted, the next year's total immigrant pool was added, 1% of the resulting total was subtracted again, the next year's total immigrant pool was added again, and so on across all 31 years. Total mortality resulting from these calculations is 47,000 people, which when subtracted from the 402,000 initial arrivals leaves 355,000 people currently alive.

B. Non-Jews

HIAS does not officially distinguish between Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from the FSU, so that its official count of 402,000 contains some non-Jews. U.S. government regulations allowed Jewish refugees (who may show up in NJPS as either Jews or PJBs) to bring non-Jewish spouses and children with them. These regulations allowed Jewish refugees to bring extended non-Jewish family members with them as well. It is crucial to understand that while HIAS includes non-Jewish family members in their figures, the NJPS estimate of Jews and PJBs does not include them. As a result, the total number of non-Jews in the HIAS figures must be removed to make the HIAS and NJPS figures comparable.

UJC researchers obtained estimates from two former HIAS professionals about the percentage of non-Jews in the total FSU population that HIAS helped to resettle. The estimates were obtained independently; neither source knew that UJC researchers had spoken to the other. In addition, neither source knew why UJC researchers were interested in knowing this information. Both sources said that approximately 25% of the FSU arrivals resettled by HIAS were non-Jews; one of the sources said that up to 33% of the arrivals in the 1990s were non-Jews.

The 25% estimate of non-Jews in the FSU immigrant population must be applied to the revised HIAS population figure of 355,000. Doing so yields 89,000 people, leaving 266,000 Jewish/PJB immigrants arriving from the FSU since 1970 and still alive in the United States.

IV. Summary

In sum, 29,000 people must be added to the NJPS estimate of adult FSU Jews: 9,000 adult PJBs and 20,000 children of Jewish/PJB immigrants also born in the FSU.

Additionally, 136,000 people must be subtracted from the HIAS figures: 47,000 people who have died since their arrival and 89,000 non-Jews.

Source	Original Estimate	Change	New Total
NJPS	252,000	+ 29,000	281,000
HIAS	402,000	- 136,000	266,000

When this is done, the NJPS estimate now exceeds the HIAS figure by a total of 15,000 immigrants. This new discrepancy can be accounted for by the fact that though a vast majority of FSU-born Jews and PJBs arrived in the United States by coming through HIAS resettlement offices, not all did. An unknown number came as immigrants sponsored by relatives who were already U.S. citizens, on work and student visas, as illegals and as parolees. Non-HIAS immigrants from the FSU were interviewed in NJPS if they qualified as Jews or PJBs, and the NJPS estimate includes them together with the HIAS arrivals.

In conclusion, the two sources of recent FSU Jewish immigrant data -- NJPS and HIAS -- provide very similar total numbers once standardized criteria are applied to both sources of data.