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Israelis in the United States: Reconciling Estimates with NJPS

In the 1980s, a common perception was that as many as 300,000-500,000 Israeli-born Jews resided in the United States. These perceptions were fueled in part by two reports, one from the Jewish Agency for Israel and one from the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles.

The 1981 Jewish Agency report, based on the investigations of then Director Shmuel Lahis, reported up to 500,000 Israelis residing in the United States. The report was commissioned as part of the Israeli government's efforts to highlight a perceived problem of emigration from Israel and to provide incentives to bring emigrants back to Israel. The 1983 Los Angeles report put the number of Israelis in the Los Angeles region alone at up to 100,000, suggesting the national estimate was several hundred thousand.

Although estimates of several hundred thousand Israelis in the U.S. remain popular, scholarly analyses of the Israeli Jewish population in the United States do not support such high figures. Almost all scholarly estimates place the total number of Israelis residing in the U.S. at 100,000 or fewer. Caution should be utilized in making direct comparisons between these studies, as precise definitions of "who is an Israeli" vary. One fairly common criterion, however, is to define Israelis as those who were born in Israel.

The NJPS estimate of Israelis in the U.S. is based on the definition above. NJPS defines "Israelis" as Jews who were born in Israel and estimates a total of 63,000 Israeli-born adult Jews living in the United States. In addition, a total of 30,000 children live in the households of Israeli-born adult Jews. Maximally, then, the Israeli-born Jewish population in the U.S. is 93,000. However, only 7,000 of the children were reported born before the Israeli-born adult immigrated to the United States, suggesting the Israeli-born Jewish population residing in the United States is 70,000, with 23,000 children born to Israeli immigrants already living in the U.S. and thus technically first generation Americans.

A variety of studies support the NJPS estimate of an Israeli-born Jewish population of less than 100,000 in the United States. In their wide-ranging examination of Israelis living in the United States, Steven Gold and Bruce Phillips report estimates from two survey sources -- the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study, both with various adjustments -- that put the Israeli-born Jewish population in the U.S. at 90,000.

Gold and Phillips also report two estimates produced by demographer Pini Herman. Working with data from the Immigration and Naturalization Service from 1948 through 1990, Herman estimates between 97,000 and 117,000 Israelis living in the U.S. in 1990. However, Herman's estimate does not adjust for mortality among Israelis with INS records dating across the 1948-90 period. Adjusting for mortality would reduce the total below 117,000. Using U.S. Census data

from 1990, Herman puts the number of Israeli-born persons in the U.S. at 90,000, but that figure does not differentiate between Jewish and non-Jewish natives of Israel, suggesting the Jewish component of the Israeli-born in the U.S. is somewhat lower.

Yinon Cohen and Yitzchak Haberfeld, sociologists at Tel Aviv University, also use 1990 U.S. Census data to estimate the Israeli-born population residing in the U.S. at that time. Their estimate, published in *Demography* -- the leading peer-reviewed academic journal for demographic studies -- puts the number of Israeli-born Jews living in the U.S. at 80,000.

Moreover, Cohen and Haberfeld point out that data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics place the total number of Israelis residing abroad -- using broader definitional criteria -- at 340,000. Of that total, up to one half may be in the United States. Consequently, estimates of 450-500,000 Israelis in the U.S. are inaccurate.

In another study, Kenneth Hill examines Israeli immigrants in the United States for the National Academy of Sciences. Hill uses a more expansive standard that defines Israelis as Israeli citizens upon entry to the United States. He uses three sources of data to produce estimates that overlap considerably with one another. Based on U.S. Census data, Hill estimates that between 67,000 to 137,000 Israelis reside in the U.S.

Using U.S. INS data, he estimates that between 55,000 and 99,000 Israelis live in the U.S. Furthermore, he employs data from the Israeli Bureau of Central Statistics to estimate that approximately 120,000 Israelis reside in the U.S., falling within the range provided by U.S. Census data. Hill's estimate of 120,000 requires the assumption that one-half of all Israelis residing outside Israel live in the U.S.

Finally, the 1997 Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles study of the Jewish population in Los Angeles estimates 14,000 Israeli-born Jews in the area. This is considerably less than 100,000 originally suggested by the Los Angeles Federation fifteen years earlier. This updated study suggests the unreliability of national estimates of Israelis in the hundreds of thousands, which would be strongly influenced by an estimate from Los Angeles.

In sum, scholarly estimates have put the estimate of Israeli-born Jews residing in the United States between 55,000 and 137,000. The NJPS estimate of 70,000-93,000 is consistent with these other estimates. The NJPS estimate is also consistent with the fact that there is no evidence in either the popular press or the scholarly literature of a significant increase in immigration from Israel to the United States during the 1990s.

There are several possible explanations for the discrepancy between higher, more popular estimates on one hand and lower, more scholarly estimates by NJPS and other studies on the other hand. Public perceptions do not take into account, for example, the return of many Israelis to Israel who have spent time in the U.S. On the other hand, popular estimates may include spouses or children of Israeli-born Jews, even if they themselves have never been to Israel or are not Israeli-born. These and other factors may contribute to "gross" overestimations of the Israeli-born Jewish population, as Cohen and Haberfeld conclude.